MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S

FANTASY

Magazine
Issue #19

$4.50

Janny Wurts
Karen Anderson
Patricia Duffy Novak
Interview with
Mercedes Lackey

19
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Cover painting by Janny Wurts

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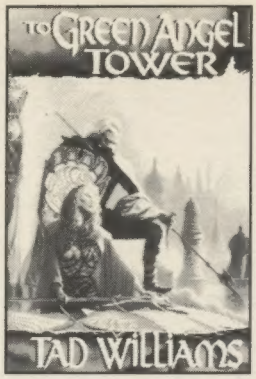

AN EARTHLY CROWN (Sword of Heaven #1) by Kate Elliott

The jaran people, led by Ilya Bakhtiian and his Earth-born wife Tess, are sweeping across their planet on a campaign of conquest. But even more important than this war is the battle for control about to ensue between Ilya and Tess' brother, the ruler of this sector of space.

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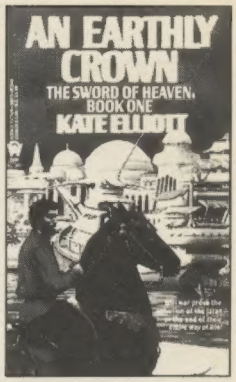

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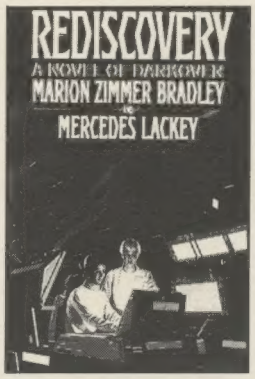

CHILD OF THUNDER (Renshai #3) by Mickey Zucker Reichert

As Colbey faces the challenges of the Seven Tasks of Wizardry, Chaos is staking its claim on the mortal world, and soon not even the Renshai warrior/wizard may be able to avert the end of the worlds.

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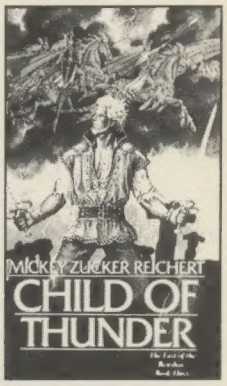

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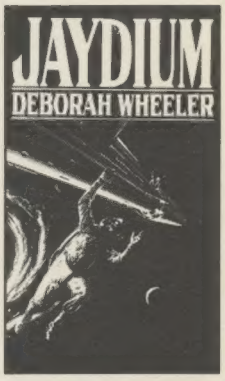

HIS CONQUERING SWORD (Sword of Heaven #2) by Kate Elliott

Charles Soerensen, leader of the rebellion against the alien Chapalii Empire has come to the planet Rhui for two reasons: to reclaim his sister Tess, and to decipher long hidden and invaluable data about the Mushai, the legendary Chapalii who once led his own rebellion against the Empire. But what hope is there of overthrowing an Empire that was thriving before humans learned to walk erect?

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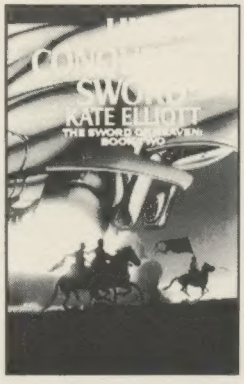

THE SWORD AND THE LION by Roberta Gray

For centuries, the city-state of Ghezrat has survived unceasing war. But now an enormous army is preparing to take Ghezrat by storm. Yet even as Ghezrat prepares to fight, one young warrior woman has a terrifyingly real vision of the city's defenses breached by magic, her home destroyed and her world changed forever....

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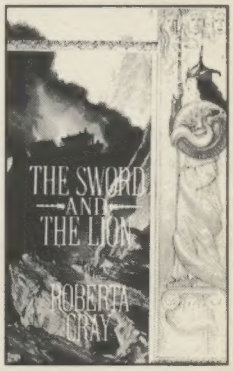

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Issue #19 – Spring 1993 – Vol. 5 No. 3

MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S
FANTASY Magazine
ISSN 0897-9286
Marion Zimmer Bradley, Ltd.
P.O. Box 249
Berkeley, California 94701
(510) 601-9000

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Individual subscriptions are $16.00 for 4 issues in the U.S., $24.00 in Canada, $38.00 foreign subscriptions. All subscriptions, including Canadian, are payable directly in U.S. funds only. Individual copies of the current issue are $5.00 plus shipping. Shipping charges are $1.00 per copy in U.S., $2.00 in Canada, foreign $6.50. Back issues (#4 sold out) $4.95 each plus $2.00 per order shipping in U.S.

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POSTMASTER:
Send address changes to:
Marion Zimmer Bradley, Ltd.
P.O. Box 249
Berkeley, CA 94701

MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S
FANTASY
Magazine

EDITORIAL

It seems transparently obvious to me that no one should write unless he has a passion for reading; otherwise, why not be a plumber or something with no reading prerequisites? The best writing advice I had from anybody in my whole life came from a bookstore owner when I was very young. He said: if you want to become a science fiction writer, study technology; if you want to write fantasies, study religion. In retrospect, it was the best advice I ever got. I would add: if you want to write about people, read everything about people: history, sociology, etiquette (my favorite research for Gothics was a battered old Emily Post which gave me a real insight into nineteenth century manners). How can you write about an alien society without knowing how society affects people?

I also feel very strongly that, before trying to write fantasy, every wannabe writer should have read a good selection of the last few hundred years of the best fantasy in the language.

There are the books that everybody should have read, just to be knowledgeable about what fantasy is. Is there any halfway literate person who hasn't read Alice in Wonderland? Or who doesn't know who Peter Pan is? I still get stories by people who have, to my consternation, never even heard of Hans Christian Andersen, or of the brothers Grimm. They innocently rewrite Cinderella or Hansel and Gretel, and don't even know they're doing it. And they can't imagine why the worldly-wise editor isn't thrilled. There seem to be some people, even in this audience, who have never read Puss in Boots, Jack and the Beanstalk, or The Jungle Book. I can't imagine anyone writing fantasy in the twentieth century who hasn't read **THE GOLDEN BOUGH**, or so much as looked into Bulfinch's **AGE OF FABLE**. Imagine not knowing what a centaur is, or a hydra, or a chimaera.

Everyone should read at least most of the great founders of fantasy: Edgar Allan Poe, Edgar Rice Burroughs, H. G. Wells, H. P. Lovecraft, Talbot Mundy, Ray Bradbury, J.R.R. Tolkien, Anne McCaffrey, Leigh Brackett, Robert Heinlein, Ursula LeGuin, Madeline L'Engle...the list is probably endless.

When you have read a good selection of these you'll have a idea of what's been done in the field: what's been done to death and what's never been done to your satisfaction, so that if you'd like to read it, you'll have to write it yourself.

Reading maketh a full man, and a discriminating one. Before you write the hundred-and-eighteenth dragon story, you should have read enough to know if it's really a new approach, or the hundred-and-seventeenth re-run of the usual one.

Of course there are only a limited number of plots with endless recombinations, but you should have read widely enough so that when you use one, you will be doing it with knowledge and discrimination. There are a few stories that have been done so often that no editor would think of reprinting them unless they had been given a very fresh new twist.

Read.

Then—and only then—is it time to sit down at your trusty typewriter, because then, at least, your brain will already be in gear.

Marion Zimmer Bradley

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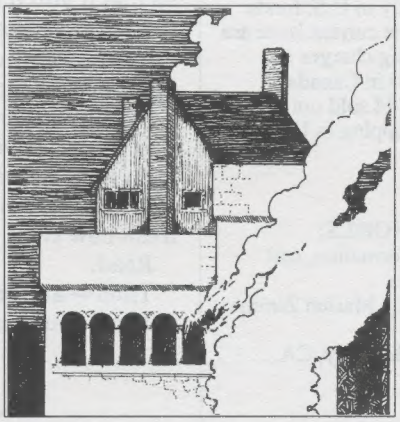

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Dreambridge

by Janny Wurts

Artwork by Janny Wurts

The axe fell and blood ran, not from living flesh but over treebark, to spatter across frosted ground. The unnatural warmth raised steam against the bite of wintry air, each drop a stark splash of scarlet against leaves left curled and frail by the season that prevailed in the earthly lands across the veil.

Far off in the borderlands, in a cottage under forest eaves never blighted by cold or steel, Kirelle awakened shivering in tangled bedclothes.

The dream, she knew, had been no nightmare to be shrugged off and forgotten upon waking. The bleeding tree would be real, though the mortal whose hand had wielded killing steel would bide unaware of his damage. In earthly lands no sign would show that this axe-wounded tree was something more than the mature offshoot of an acorn.

Kirelle sat up, wishing the soft scents of apple blossoms and pressed herbs could ease her gut-deep uneasiness.

A snowy owl sat perched on her windowsill.

The instant it saw her take notice, it flew, ghost-silent on spread wings. Mild air stirred through the space it left vacant, rustling the bundled herbs strung in rows from the rafters. The phials of potions and simples above Meara's worktable loomed in dim ranks on their shelves; useless, all, Kirelle despaired. If the trappings of an herbalist's lore held no remedy for an axe-stung tree, the deeper mysteries of the art could be called on for other than succor; this she feared as she crossed in trepidation to the window. Bird and dream would not have arrived by coincidence. Owls could read the future, and owls alone could cross at will from the borderlands that bridged like a ribbon between the fey realms and mortal earth.

Kirelle reached the sill, touched by wry thought of Meara, who had laughed when first asked why their cottage must lie in the thickest heart of the forest, an inconvenient distance from the village. *"There's a part of our trade, girl, that has naught to do with sick babes and dry cattle. Sure as rain falls, you'll learn wonders."*

Wishing the wise woman was not away to Eastling to attend a birthing, Kirelle saw a rider on a silver-gray horse awaiting below in the dooryard. Old and straight-backed, and elegantly mantled, his skin was dark as turned earth, the beard that bristled from under his hood a glint of pale silver by moonlight. Both hands were gloved in black. The air all around him seemed alive with owls, weaving like silent shuttlecocks through the warp and weft of the breeze.

The Wizard of the Forest, and none other, had come here to ask for some favor.

Oh, trouble had come, of the direst measure, Kirelle understood as she hastened to her wardrobe to dress. Little mysteries that othertimes would have evoked her delight failed to lift her foreboding, not the teasing play of the airsprite that whirled a mild tempest of apple petals through the casement, nor the wakeful mocking bird that sang in the melodic tones of a lark. Kirelle hastily pulled on the patched hose and shirt that briar snags should have sent to the rag bin. Too fast for neatness, she brushed and braided her waist-length dark hair, then threw on her cloak, its thread spun by fey from the fibers of midsummer flowers. Lighter than down, warmer than wool, the fabric shimmered like twilight from palest blue to deep violet.

From her pantry, Kirelle snatched up her satchel and a seed cake sweetened with honey. She was no fey, to go without sustenance until touched by a whim for gay feasting. Neither was she entirely human, since the day she had been snatched as a changeling from parents she could not remember.

The Wizard of the Forest had once been human also, before he had been guardian of the border realm. His knowledge of the mysteries ran so deep only rock itself was any wiser. If he held any name beyond his title, it had been forgotten, or else, like the most ancient trees, through long silence words had lost all power to rule him.

Uneasy for the dream that had drawn his presence to her dooryard, Kirelle pushed closed the cottage door. The latch dropped with a clear chink of brass, and the silver-gray horse raised its head. Bells on its trappings trilled an answering chime as the Wizard reined around to face her.

His study felt distinct as a physical touch. Despite the mild lines that etched

his features, the merciless strengths of his powers were too fierce to mask in serenity.

Overcome by the presence of portents too large for her skills to encompass, Kirelle gave way to impatience. "Why should you send such a dream?" she burst out. "Bleeding trees bespeak evil deeds, and no herbal of mine can heal such, nor ease the wrath of the fey when they learn that mortal steel has cut heartwood."

Motionless, the Wizard regarded her. His horse champed softly at the bit. Harness bells clinked in single notes, and the stars themselves regaled his presence in a thousand points of bright light. "You are most quick to say what you cannot do." Like his bells, his voice was rich in overtones, and his searching gaze never wavered.

Unsettled and out of her depth, Kirelle wished the wisewoman who taught her might stand here in her stead.

"If Meara's aid was needed, I should be in Eastling, to fetch her," the Wizard added gravely. "And I had no part in any sending. Instead, I followed the dream's path, and that, of itself, led to you. The Eld Tree that holds the last link with mortal earth lies threatened. Can you know this and still refuse help?"

Sorry for her haste, and never more aware of her inexperience, Kirelle could not ignore the implications. When fey magic had knitted the borderlands that divided the otherworld realms from mortal earth, thin places were left in the fabric, some said for hope that mankind might someday outgrow their heedless ways, and that misunderstandings between races might be eased. Others claimed the fey still cherished mortal lands for their plangent and transient beauty. Whichever tale held truth, a chosen few Trees from the Eldforests were left bound to earth's soil as anchorpoints, and on such sites the veil could be crossed in the months of solstice and equinox. While mortal kind grew ever more estranged from the mysteries, such crossings were made less and less, and finally rarely at all.

Few could say when the fey had last ridden the wild hunt at midsummer. Except for the isolated foray to snatch a few changelings for mischief, the borderlands bridge through the veil lay all but forgotten. Only one Tree yet remained tied to earth, sorrowfully aged by the turn of time and seasons. If it died, the last link would be gone; fey mysteries would be lost to earth forever.

"You do see," the Wizard said gently. "A mortal with an axe has violated the last Tree, and the fey, when they hear, will cry vengeance. If blood price is not met, their wrath might leave the worlds forever sundered."

Kirelle regarded the clearing that held her cottage, then the orchard, bejeweled with dew in the still, brief hour before dawn. She watched the windsprite dance amid shedding blossoms, and relived her irritation at the burrow the gnome had dug in his hope of stealing apples when they ripened. The chance that the powers that quickened these things might come to be unraveled tore at her heart like pain.

"How has this happened?" she asked the Wizard. "What disarmed the guardspells that should hide the last Tree from the eyes of any blunderer bearing steel?"

"Ah, wise lady, the answers I have are too few. There was not one man, but three, and the owl I sent to turn their footsteps was shot down while in flight." The Wizard bent his head, grief in his eyes like hot sparks. "My brave messenger lies dead, murdered with as little thought as the axe-blow that cleft the Eld Tree."

Kirelle could have wept then, for certainty. "My task is to go across and turn these mortals from their reaving?"

His hands crossed over his saddlebow, the Wizard regarded the silent flight of the companion owls still left to him. "The choice must be yours. My birds see the future, and they led to you. Since the Tree's cry for help chose you also, the mysteries themselves have their reason. But more than these borderlands lie at risk. If you cross, I intend to pass with you."

No need to belabor the dangers, that to step through the veil was to risk a cold exile: perhaps aging, surely death, if mishap occurred on the other side. Once the fey learned of the harm to one of their own, their anger would demand retribution. Blood-price would be asked that one of three mortals must pay, or the borderlands themselves could be forfeit.

"We must go. Time is short, and the crossing is most easily made at the site of the Eld Tree itself." The Wizard wheeled his horse, expectant that Kirelle must follow.

"I haven't said I'd go at all," she whispered. But reluctance could not unmake dire portents. Kirelle trailed along under the glide of the owls, pierced through with sadness and dread. The avaricious, sneaking little pranks of the gnomes in retrospect seemed joyfully endearing. Nothing she owned would have been too precious to give, to ensure safe return to her orchards.

Dank under shadow and the slow drip of dew, the paths that had led Kirelle to share in the wood's lore and wisdom tonight neither welcomed nor befriended. Breezes muttered through the branches to a tireless sibilance of leaves that whispered of driving men mad. In the past, when the worlds were still joined, to stray uninvited into an Eldforest was death, and sometimes worse. These trees were roused and aware, and although they had known no touch of cold steel since the veil had been raised to protect them, they remembered older times, and thoughtless humans. Outside the borderlands, an Eld Tree had been maimed by an axe. Although Kirelle had never trodden those lands ruled by time, or done aught but rejoice with growing wood, the forest in its anger, in the thick, stately flow of its sap, did not care.

Oppressed by unsainly hostility, Kirelle tightened grip on her satchel. Her voice shook as she crooned soft notes to reassure the trees of her harmless intentions. The Wizard chanted strictures of his own, mightier by far than any song of hers. But melody and litany availed nothing. Black boughs dipped low and laced the way like knotwork. Chill leaves pressed down like a shroud.

The gray horse snorted uneasy alarm and sidled, as gently, the Wizard addressed the trees. "Your rage is misplaced. Would you hinder ones who go to help?"

The forest paid no heed.

The rustle of boughs held no reply, and a brooding moment passed. Kirelle endured the scratching touch of twigs and the prisoning, chill kiss of leaves.

From somewhere near at hand an owl called; the Wizard's voice answered, steady and soft. To Kirelle, he added, "The forest has denied us free passage, and further persuasion will not sway it. Without the Tree's bridging powers, I can do nothing but raise raw force and send on one of us alone." He looked at Kirelle, clear-eyed and awaiting her decision; if she went on, she must brave the earthly world and three reaving mortals by herself.

But to stay behind was to remain here, trapped by the rage of the forest until the threat to the Eld Tree was righted. Fail in that task, Kirelle knew, and no path she could tread would be safe. The clearing that held Meara's orchards would be barred from human use. Without the

small daily gifts that bought blessing, the apple trees would be choked out, root and branch, and the cottage torn asunder stone from stone.

In such things, the balance that ruled the borderlands was unforgiving. Gifts of life and sustenance were never to be taken for granted.

"I will have to place trust in the Tree's dream," she finally said. "Let me be the one to go."

The Wizard bent in his saddle and offered three flakes of slate smoothed by the waves on the lake shore. "These talismans carry a dreamspell that can be tuned by your healer's gift. Set one in the hand of each mortal as he sleeps, and let the beliefs in his heart shape his fate. Once you've crossed, I cannot help. The Eld Tree must show your way back. My white owl will attend as your guide."

The appointed bird banked in a whispered curve and called, mournfully dusky and wild. Beyond that, the wood's hostile stillness remained unbroken. Not the ratchet of crickets nor wind in the leaves wished her well as the Wizard raised uncanny spells to bridge the veil, that twisting, intricate web of energies that divided earthly lands from the otherworldly realm of the mysteries.

Alan lay wakeful in the chill of a blustery winter night. It wasn't that his sleeping bag was too thin; he'd bought a good one, suited for subzero temperatures, when he'd thought he'd be hiking in the Rockies. As much as the cold was apt to bother him, his palms were sweating hot.

Raw nerves kept him jumpy and wakeful. Not good at lying, especially to himself, he could not deny that his years in the service had wrecked his appreciation for the wilderness. Not a truth he liked to admit; still less to the two others with him: Bill, all macho bluster, and Rafe, who acted the suave city sophisticate, but who'd die before letting anybody see he couldn't beat a jock at his own game.

Why was it, Alan thought bitterly, that male pride too often held nonconformity as a weakness?

He reached out for the hundredth time in an hour and checked the rifle gripped in his hand. Deer season — what a laugh. He found no joy in hunting animals, hunting anything, in sad fact, not since his time in the service. Then, killing had meant plain survival, until the mind grew sick on its own fear, and a man could grow to live for the unholy thrill of an enemy's blood on the ground.

Another man dead meant staying alive. Except those who came home found that life had somehow rearranged itself, and nothing of past importance had retained real meaning any more.

Alan stroked icy steel and shivered like a baby. The safety on his weapon wasn't set. Recollection left him sweating, of being ripped out of sleep by flares and gunfire, and of the buddy who'd died because of a shot he couldn't return fast enough. The wind lashed at the trees, and a scratchy patter of leaves tumbled past. Alan tensed, halfway to a crouch with his rifle up, before he could stop himself and rationalize: this was the States, and rustling leaves here were just that, not an enemy stalking to kill.

God, he shouldn't be here. Never mind he felt obliged to mediate, to keep Bill and Rafe from destroying each other in a rivalry neither one would let wither. Twenty years since discharge, and, no use pretending, there were moments when his nerves were still peeled raw. Alan berated himself for not having sense enough to shrug off outworn high-school loyalties. He should've let two friends that time had changed and distanced thrash out their competitive egos on their own.

The wind blew, mournfully soft. The dressed-out carcass of Bill's trophy spun creaking from the rope that lashed it up. The owl that Rafe had winged just to even up the score would be bleeding somewhere in the brush, if it wasn't just as wastefully dead. Strung out with nerves, Alan couldn't bring himself to close his eyes, not without somebody on watch. To turn his mind from past horrors, he thought about Bill's indefatigable boast that he shot his trophies for the freezer. Everybody knew his wife felt sick at the thought of a dead deer.

Alan shifted, discovered himself checking his gun again, and cursed himself for a fool. Who cared whether or not he could face himself if Rafe and Bill were left alone to drive each other too hard? Both men were married; Bill had a daughter. The wives should have taken over the chore of being the influence that tempered. Sweating more, and hurting tense, Alan took a breath of frost-sharp air that turned in his fickle mind to the smells of steaming hot jungle, and sharp-edged anxieties of enemies that lurked in dank tunnels. He stared up at oak leaves to moor his slipping sanity, and to shove unwanted survival patterns into a past that refused to stay quiet.

Sometime after checking his gun for the two-hundredth time, he dozed and fell into fitful dreams.

The first step beyond the veil raised the sharp crackle of dry leaves, cause enough for Kirelle to stiffen in alarm when she had known nothing underfoot but lush moss. Then the air, equally strange, edged with frost and suffused with the underlying scents of rot and decay. This was the other side, where the wrong word or the mishandled chance encounter could doom the unwary traveller to lifelong exile and death.

Kirelle paused, aware of the pull of the moon in her blood, of the wheeling swing of strange stars, and the slow, insistent aging that ruled all aspects of earthly life.

Curiosity filled her, too. She had been born here, taken across the veil as a changeling unknowable years in the past. Never before had Kirelle felt moved to wonder whether her human parents had grieved when the glamour left by the fey wore off, and they discovered an unbreathing bundle of twigs left in place of their stolen child.

A moment later, listening uneasily, Kirelle noticed the wood's appalling silence. Wind alone dared raise voice in this place. No crickets called, nor any night-singing bird. The missing, subliminal thread of harmony her art should have sensed from growing wood raised panic, until she realized: stripped branches and hard-edged, unsoftened moonlight were proper, here. This world went dormant for winter, its smaller creatures frost-killed or departed until the renewal of spring.

The only vibrant life within reach of Kirelle's senses seemed to be the Wizard's white owl, that carved impatient circles as it waited for her to regain wits and purpose. Kirelle touched a sapling to borrow from its rooted firmness the assurance to brace her failing nerves. But her contact revealed something worse than dormancy; the young beech felt sluggish and dull under her hands, stupidly reft of its power of being and retarded from self-awareness.

Horror and pity sent her reeling a step back.

These earthly trees were mute, brutishly groping through soil and sunlight without the gift of wakening. No one had walked this wood for many years who understood how to nurture the spirit nature of wild trees.

Kirelle bit her lip, tasting tears. The anger of the fey would bring justice for the neglect and contempt that had befallen these sorry forests. But if the disso-

lution of the borderlands and the final separation of the mysteries was a punishment such thoughtlessness deserved, her own fate and the Wizard's freedom were now as deeply entangled.

Grown urgent at her delay, the white owl banked broad wings and flew. Kirelle stumbled to follow. The ache in her assumed the proportions of despair, that the threatening presence of three reavers permitted her no interval to rouse these trees to awareness.

Artwork by Janny Wurts

Against the mute void that heartlessness had allowed this wood to become, the true-song of the Eld Tree rang in solitary splendor against the far distant chime of the stars. Long before the white owl swooped to alight on the mighty oak's branches, Kirelle could sense its power. Although leaves, trunk, and branches embraced the earthly world, the taproots of this Tree bridged the veil and sank deep into borderlands soil.

Yet reunion with the familiar brought no sense of rejoicing. The Tree's muddied anger all but stopped Kirelle's breath. Sour wind tugged her cloak hem and stirred the hair that twigs had raked loose from her braid as her healer's gifts picked past raw rage to bare the thread of stark pain underlying. A moment later, as the late rising moon sliced torn clouds, she saw the gleam of the axe left struck in striated bark.

Even from several paces off, the steel raised an ache in her bones. Fully as hurtful was the blood reek of the stag, thanklessly killed, then gutted and lashed to a branch by a rope that creaked in the wind. Other unidentifiable odors dizzied Kirelle's senses as she made herself close the last steps.

And there they were, three forms sprawled out on bare ground and wrapped in bright colored bedding that to Kirelle's eye looked light and fine-woven as silk. They smelled of woodsmoke and damp leaves and the animal tang of dried sweat. No aura of savagery warned which had cut the Eld Tree, or which had slain the Wizard's owl. Asleep, the men looked innocent and ordinary, in their way as dumbly vulnerable as this world's unloved trees. Kirelle saw nothing she recognized as a weapon beyond the axe, though other steel things whose use she could not fathom riddled the site of their camp.

Touched by a strange surge of pity, Kirelle shivered. The axe blade in any earthly tree would have roused no uncanny reverberations. But with the Wizard left trapped by the Eldforest's ire, her healer's preference for mercy must not lead her to risk that the fey's cry for vengeance be balked from finding expiation. The talisman stones must be set, and their dreams be given rein to unravel three minds into nightmare.

The nearer man slept in a sprawl, one powerful arm clenched over his chest, and his legs entangled in his bedding. He breathed in the rhythm of untroubled rest and never stirred as Kirelle reached out with shaking fingers and tucked the first stone in his palm. Softly, silently, she engaged the powers of her art to sound his intents and make a weaving of his vulnerabilities.

Bill Farlane leveled his rifle. Equipped with the finest telescopic sight, he aligned the crosshairs on the buck. The moment came back in perfect clarity, from the clean bite of the wind to the winter-thin patch of sunlight that danced on the deer's dun pelt.

He held his breath to steady his aim, squeezed off the round like a caress — then felt the triumph in his gut freeze to horror as the deer dissolved, replaced before his eyes by his daughter's pink and blue parka.

No! — his thought too late. Already the report of the rifle spat its flat crack through the wood. Crows exploded into raucous, indignant flight. Pink acrylic showed a blossoming stain of red, and a pitiful three-year-old body crashed headlong into sun-dappled leaf mold.

"Nice shot!" Rafe said, his personal brand of sarcasm making even praise feel like insult.

Bill straightened, mouth opened to cry Sallie's name.

But to his utter terror, his heartdeep cry of grief emerged as banal conversation. "It was a nice shot, darned if it wasn't."

Those words, he thought wildly, *they'd been said over a deer.*

But no buck lay in the clearing. Only Sallie, dreadfully bloody and still. The rifle still warm in his hand had shot her cold, and like some ugly, played-over script, Alan's voice was repeating, "Well, fine. You've bagged your trophy. For the love of mike, go in quickly. Make sure the shot was clean and use your knife if it wasn't."

Bill screamed in impotent silence: *That's my daughter.* Yet the words stayed mired in his head. His shoulders set for a satisfied swagger, he ejected the spent shell and laid his rifle against a tree. Locked into actions that denied his raw grief, reft of all power to stop himself, he saw that willpower and muscle, all of his prideful strength and competence were going to do him no good. He was going to rise, going to walk, going to kneel down by his little dead daughter, and dress out her body as he should have done the killed meat of a deer.

While Rafe said something ordinary and Alan gave a meaningless reply, Bill felt himself rise from his stalking crouch and heft his new knife in his hand. The first step toward Sallie's body tore him to inward shreds; he knew, oh god oh god, he knew that the feel of soft, white skin, the drum-leather punch as the blade sliced through flesh, the steaming blood as the abdominal cavity opened, was going to sear him from sanity...*God, oh God, Sallie, NO!*

The huge man curled into a ball, tearing pitifully at his bedding. He sucked breath after gasping breath while his stubbled face twisted in anguish.

Kirelle fought back tears and guilt, aware as never before that her healer's

instinct to mend in this place might tempt her to irrevocable folly. These were reavers, whose actions threatened ruin to the borderlands. Their misguided feelings could not be permitted to matter. Kirelle fished the second stone from her satchel and approached the next man, the one with the gentle face who lay with his cheek neatly cradled on one elbow. By appearance, he seemed the most harmless of the three, with his fine, pale hair, and the glint of a linked gold bracelet circling one elegant wrist.

Feeling the sting acutely — that Bill had bagged a deer *he* should have seen first — Rafe lounged in bed and relived the frustrated moment when the owl had chanced to fly past. His reflex reaction had made up for the lapse, as he'd ripped off that snap shot on impulse.

He shut his eyes, revelling in the satisfaction he'd felt as the bird tumbled out of mid-flight.

The snooze alarm's buzz erased Rafe's faint smile. Lord, he should have had his tail in and out of the shower ten minutes ago.

Worried over the financial summary he was expected to present, that was in order as far as notes went but needed fleshing out before the meeting, Rafe slugged aside designer bedclothes and stopped in shocked surprise. His hands were smeared with fresh blood. On the sheets by his pillow lay an owl's feather, broken and wrung and blotched scarlet.

Four-letter words were inadequate. His first thought, that he'd be late for the board meeting, was belatedly followed by the incongruity of the gory feather. He hesitated, unwilling to come to grips with the weirdness, that a dead owl could enact some spooky sort of vengeance.

The concept was just too bizarre.

Unwilling to lend credence to hallucinations, Rafe plunged bullishly on toward the bathroom.

But his hands as he turned on the shower were still maddeningly, scarletly drenched. The fancy's irrational persistence left him ticked enough to plunge into the spray while the water was still icy cold. Through subsequent shivers and gooseflesh, he refused to note the color of the water that swirled down the drain. Blast if he'd be sorry he'd shot some worthless owl.

He killed the water, snapped a bath sheet over his shoulders, shaved, then made a paranoid inspection of his knuckles. There had to be a cut he hadn't noticed.

Nothing. He dug out a clean shirt and dismissed the distraction as he hurried through the motions of dressing.

The blood appeared again as he snatched up his briefcase. Frantic, he dropped the expensive leather handle before the stains soaked in. The case hit the hardwood floor with an echoing bang and fell over as he dashed to the kitchen for a dish-cloth. His thoughts on his presentation all scattered, he dabbed ineffectively at the blotches left on his briefcase. Predictably, they didn't come out.

He'd have to spend the bucks to buy another one.

A harried glance at his Rolex showed he was now irretrievably late. The report was going to have to be presented in its current, raw state, no credit to his months of hard work. Annoyed by life's unfairness, Rafe snatched his overcoat from the closet and ran.

He got no farther than his apartment door before his fingers became drenched in blood again. An explosive curse ripped from him. This time, he'd managed to spatter his shirtcuff into the bargain. Back in the bathroom, hands under the running water: *this has to be a nightmare*, he thought. Raggedly nervous, he reached to straighten his tie, then recalled his wet fingers and jerked short. The last fool straw in this messed-up morning was to look as if he'd dribbled breakfast down his front. With a sour laugh at himself, he grabbed briefcase and overcoat, rushed out of the apartment and sprinted into the parking lot. He unlocked his BMW, breathless and feeling pig stupid, and hopeful the fresh air might steady him.

Probably stress and anxiety had caused his mind to play tricks.

But when he jabbed the car keys into the ignition, the fresh blood was back again. Damning, slippery fingerprints smeared on everything he touched. Choking back sobs of frustration, he saw another mangled owl's feather float down and settle on the dashboard.

At that moment Rafe fully understood: he was not going to handle his meeting; he was in fact going to lose his job. The money and prestige and quick thinking upon which he had secured his success were not going to save him. An owl shot down for a moment's stung pride had marked him, and the crime was going to blight his life forever...

Kirelle sat back on her heels, saddened by what she had learned. The two reavers she had dreamspelled were just thoughtless, prideful braggarts, ignorant rather than evil. A stag and an owl had died to no purpose, and for that, she must see two mortals driven from the wood with incentive not to return. The last of the three, by default, must have been the one to cut the Eld Tree. He must be left bound in sleep to even the balance when the fey arrived to demand blood-price.

Bent with the stone cupped in her hands, Kirelle composed herself to discharge that last unpleasant duty. Beside her, the blond man with the costly bracelet moaned in the deep throes of nightmare, and the third reaver snapped out of sleep.

Silent, he was, and blinding quick. His explosive surge threw off blankets to bare the moon-caught gleam of hard steel. Breathing fast, his grip on his weapon bone-white, he swung to take out the intruder.

The near proximity of cold metal had already stung Kirelle to inadvertent recoil. Her braid tumbled down across her shoulder, a slash of dark against the fey-woven shimmer of her cloak.

The reaver sucked in a breath half-strangled with surprise and managed, just barely, to curb his reflex to kill. "A girl!" He shifted onto one elbow, stiff with unfriendly suspicion. His weapon continued to threaten as he snapped off an emphatic question.

His accent was unmusical and clipped, the words too rushed for understanding. Kirelle shook her head, while his attentiveness dissected every inch of her. She saw his moment of reassessment: that she was a woman, if small and otherworldly, and not some briar-scraped child dressed in tatterdemalion rags. His eyes stayed mad nonetheless, empty as smoke over water. If Kirelle had expected him to be ugly, he was not. Reaver he might be, and patently vicious, but he was neatly made. In body and feature he had as deadly a grace as one of the fair folk themselves.

Kirelle stared at him, undone by fear and unsure what to do next. Beside her, the blond companion ensnared in spelled dreams started hoarsely and raggedly to sob.

The man yanked back in a flinch at the sound, and Kirelle snatched the chance to try retreat.

His left hand shot out and caught hers, and painful strength caged the half-enspelled stone between their shared grip.

Kirelle cried out, aware of the danger, but utterly unable to tear free; and so it passed that the dreamsnare unfurled and

meshed with two minds and two hearts.

For a second, all senses upended. The mortal man beheld himself through borderland eyes in a spinning rush that made him gasp. The slaughter of a deer and an owl became re-rendered as pittance before his own most thoughtless axe blow, so innocently motivated, a plain measure of safeguard to stow edged steel so that nobody should blunder into an unsheathed tool after dark. Torn headlong from mortal heedlessness, Alan saw blood well from heartwood. He felt its pain shake the silence of winter night to disharmony, then knew the deep, subliminal thunder of an Eldforest's awakening to rage. Full knowledge of his deed wrung from him tears of abject despair.

At the same moment, Kirelle, helplessly torn from her roots, felt herself seared by the murderous war that had plundered the joy from a lifetime, horrors that had tortured and killed, an unconscionable destruction of land and life that had left this survivor half-unstrung in time of peace. The ways of mortal earth had nigh unto broken Alan's spirit, Kirelle saw. Least-likely reaver of the three, it was he whose blood would be called to right the balance to placate the wrath of the fey. The irony cut, as her healer's perception further revealed that the hurt in him cried out for reprieve: that after years of misery, his heart had raised its answer: the desperate strength of his need had unbound the arcane defenses. The Eld Tree of itself had shed secrecy, to invite this man across the veil.

"You," she gasped, as the firestorm of images thinned and finally released her. "It was *you* who invoked the great mystery."

Alan freed her hand, head bent and shaking. "I didn't know."

"That's not entirely true." Kirelle sighed. "Your heart led you better than you realized."

Reminded that moment of the gun still clenched in his hand, Alan snapped on the safety and cast it aside in distaste. His gaze, light as smoke, flicked across her. Then he got up. Still terrible in grace, he strode away from his sleeping companions to draw the offending axe his blow had left wedged in Eld oak. He ran light hands over scarred wood until his longing burst out into words. "Show me the way to cross the veil. Your borderlands are more beautiful than dreams, and what life I lead here has no meaning."

"You can't know what you're asking!" Kirelle said, moved to desolation by his plight. "Your steel has harmed the last Eld Tree on earth. Across the veil, the blood of your deed will draw the forest's wrath and mark you out for fey vengeance."

Artwork by Janny Wurts

He stood, resolute in the calm of his conviction. "Then let me answer there for my ignorance."

His words fell with an uncomfortable, sharpened clarity upon a night that abruptly seemed changed. The deep shadows went suddenly, painfully harsh-edged, and the moonlight seemed alive with vibration.

"Veil magic," Kirelle gasped, her dread overridden by a piercingly musical voice. "Debt must be answered for, here and now!"

Overhead, the Wizard's white owl raised wings and exploded into flight as Kirelle whirled, the mortal man along with her.

Around the trunk of the Eld Tree stepped a rangy, graceful figure magnificently clad in green and gold. A black lacquer bow adorned with river pearl crossed his shoulder. Beneath hair the glossy dark of a raven's wing, his eyes shone a lucent silver gray. No crackle of sound betrayed his step as he crossed the carpet of dead leaves. The sightly beauty of him made the earthly air seem to burn and shimmer with his presence.

The mortal man by Kirelle's side gasped aloud, his deadly fast reflexes turned stupid and still by the uncanny arrival of the fey.

Kirelle had never owned courage; old Meara often had chided that unsettled nerves made her tart. Before the fey could raise voice to claim blood-price, she found herself crying useless protest. "Your kind had abandoned these woods. Who is to blame if spells of guard set so long in the past have thinned to the point where one man's need could wake the mysteries? Alan's act was without malice. His desire was only to protect."

The fey regarded Kirelle in all of his bright, cold arrogance. "Price must be paid, nonetheless. Steel has cut an Eld Tree, and blood must atone for blood. It is true enough the guard spells have weakened; thus I am sent here, to unmake the last link in the veil."

"Why claim the one man whose heart could touch an Eld Tree?" Kirelle begged, piercingly torn for a failure that could not save the Wizard's borderlands, nor spare one innocent life. Her gesture encompassed the two men asleep on the ground. "There are other mortal reavers whose interests are the more callous."

"Two lives for one?" The fey raised his brows, perhaps prepared to strike a bargain, until Alan reached out and caught Kirelle's wrist, his fingers coldly unsteady.

"Wait. I forbid this."

Years and reason and counseling had never satisfied his guilt, that chance had granted him survival when others more worthy had died. Blundering through life without faith or clear purpose, this time he could not walk away. To the fey, he insisted, "If it's true and I've offended, I will give what is asked."

"No," Kirelle whispered. "You will yield up nothing. Your death will not win reprieve, nor will it save the last link. The mysteries will be cut away from your

earth, and our borderlands will perish along with them."

The fey regarded her, narrow-eyed. "What does any of that matter? Earthly folk care nothing for Eld ways. The mysteries, to them, are just tales, and true magic a beauty forgotten."

Which was, perhaps, the real reason why the veil's guardspells had slackened, Kirelle thought. The mysteries themselves might have reached out to a mortal to thwart further shrinking of their boundaries. She knew now, beyond doubt, why she had been the one chosen to receive the Eld Tree's dream. "Your complaints could be changed," she said quickly. "These woods are not dead, nor unfeeling, but only numbly asleep."

"You would stay, then, and waken them?" The fey laughed, his mirth a sword-sting of mockery.

Kirelle swallowed. One word, one act, and she would be trapped for a lifetime. She glanced at the mortal beside her, felt once again the unquiet pain that tormented him, the creative potential this world's works had taken and twisted and ruined. "Let this one go," she begged, knowing the borderlands could ease him. At last, her own will was certain. "I will stay. This wood will have me as guardian, and the old mysteries will be quickened anew to nurture and guard the Eld Tree."

"A life for a life," the fey agreed, unsmiling in acknowledgment of the pact. "Your mortal shall have his reprieve. He may cross back with me to the borderlands if you remain here in his place."

Dawn threw gray fog over the campsite when Bill awakened from his dream. Gasping and sweating as if he'd been running for his life, he glanced up, saw branches half blurred in dawn mist, then loosed a sharp, breathless laugh. Nightmares, he thought, overwhelmed by a wash of relief; only nightmares. For a second, on waking, he'd actually believed he'd shot down and gutted his own daughter.

The vision remained acidly vivid. Bill pushed onto one elbow to reaffirm that the trophy he'd dressed was a buck.

The shock hit like a slug in the gut: for there was no deer, *only Sallie, hanging by one ankle from a blood-stained length of rope.* Behind her, clad in a cloak that looked cut from no earthly sort of cloth, a tiny woman stood with the wind blowing through her dark hair.

Reproach in her eyes as biting as frost, she spoke before grief could unhinge him. "Go. Take your trophy, and upon your heart's blood, may you never kill again for your vanity."

Weeping with fear, shaking and weak at the knees, Bill scrambled out of his sleeping bag. "I can't do this," he gasped. But the woman's eyes gave him no quarter. More frightened of her than of losing his last hold on sanity, he rummaged underneath his jacket, found the knife he'd stripped off the night before. Half blind with tears of remorse, he reached up and cut his daughter down. Sobbing deep in his throat, he wrapped her slack body in his sleeping bag, then clumsily smoothed her blonde hair.

His hand brushed fur, cold gray fur, then the unyielding tines of an antler. In his arms, cradled against his bare chest, lay the blood-rank carcass of a buck.

Bill looked up, too shocked to be angry, but the woman who had threatened him was gone. Unsettled by feelings that every move he made was being watched, he spilled the wretched carcass upon the ground, packed up his gear, and fled without a backward thought for his forsaken companions.

Left alone at the campsite, Rafe roused to a spill of winter sunlight and the rustle of foraging birds. No apartment, no office, no report due, he understood in a flood of rising spirits. He thrust his arms from his sleeping bag to stretch...and froze, half crippled by chills.

His hands were running with red blood. He started up in panic, then all but retched as he blundered across the stiff, feathered corpse of an owl that someone had left dumped on his chest.

His scream tore apart the forest silence.

The small woman who watched him went unnoticed until he ran out of breath. She stood over him, uncanny and bitterly accusing. "You will go," she said clearly. "Kill no more for your ego, and the death of the owl will be forgiven."

"Who are you?" gasped Rafe. But he didn't want an answer, not really. He just needed out of here, as fast as he could throw on clothes and jacket.

Afraid for his sanity and survival, he abandoned his expensive gear and fancy rifle where they lay. Without pause to look for Bill or Alan, he raced headlong to his car. Sweaty, panting, and shaky, he waited until he had the engine running before he dared to check whether the blood was gone from his hands.

Under the Eld Tree, in a morning wood emptied of reavers, Kirelle regarded rank after rank of sunlit, sleeping trees. Amid a litter of meaningless camping gear, she sensed the soil beneath her feet and listened to winds that had long ago forgotten speech. She found no regret in her heart, but a strange, eager joy for the task that lay ahead of her.

Rapt as she was, intent upon the needs of the forest she had adopted for her own, she did not hear the silent beat of wings. The owls that flew widdershins around the Eld Tree went unnoticed as they flocked and finally settled to roost in the branches over her head.

The first she knew of the Wizard's presence was the merry chime of brass bells. She spun, surprised, as he reined his gray horse to a stop and regarded the oddments of gear the reavers had abandoned when they fled.

A smile carved his face. "Did you think to bring back the mysteries to mortal earth on your own?"

Kirelle laughed. "I didn't think at all, but only chose as I must."

She moved to the Wizard's side, pleased that they would waken the wood together, and knowing that borderlands magic would one day come to bridge the veil and restore the lost link between worlds.

"Alan is with Meara, and safe," said the Wizard. "Anyone lacking a healer's compassion could have left him unjustly condemned as a reaver." The secretive smile behind his silver beard turned ruefully reminiscent. "You may not have known, but my guardianship began with an inadvertent slight to an Eld Tree. When our labor is complete, and the wild hunt returns to ride these earthly fields, I much doubt your exile will be permanent."

❧

JANNY WURTS has painted covers for most of the New York paperback publishers, including for six of her own novels. She won the World Fantasy Convention's Best In Show two years running for the cover of her novel, **MASTER OF WHITESTORM**, published by Roc Books. Her written works include **SORCERER'S LEGACY**, to be re-released from Bantam in May; **CURSE OF THE MISTWRAITH** forthcoming in hardbound from Roc; and the Empire trilogy with Ray Feist. Her paintings have been exhibited in NASA's 25th Anniversary exhibit in the Cleveland Museum of Natural History, and in the Delaware Art Museum, which owns one of her originals. She would like to thank M.C. Floerkey, and others whose experiences in life and war provided inspiration for this story.

The Griffin

by Barbara Rosen

The birds hadn't awakened yet. Mariellen fumbled for her key, her breath drifting away in white clouds on the cold air. In a month it would be daylight when she got off the subway; in a month she wouldn't be half frozen by the time she got to work. She pushed open the door and flicked on the lights, blinking in the sudden fluorescent glare.

Inside it was comfortably warm. A racket of excited barking met her ears before she was halfway down the stairs.

"All right, all right, take it easy."

She unlatched the door leading to the back yard and turned to survey the kennels. The Jefferson dog was crowding the front of his cage, eyes pleading. Too well housebroken for his own good, poor thing.

"Okay, you first." She released the catch and the cage door swung wide. The dog bolted into the yard, stopped outside the door and cocked his leg against the fence.

Mariellen watched until he was finished. Then she filled her bucket, pulled the paper lining out of his cage and began her morning cleaning.

By the time Dr. Saunders arrived all the boarding animals had been taken care of and Mariellen was halfway through the hospital ward. The doctor didn't usually disturb her when she was working, but today he came downstairs, pacing restlessly and peering into the cages.

"The Roth cat had diarrhea again," she reported. "Should I run another fecal?"

"Might as well."

"And the Feingold dog still won't eat."

He nodded. "Let's wait another day; that one can afford to lose a little weight."

"That's for sure. Okay, oh, yes, the Johnson dog. Do you want to keep her on fluids?"

"Yes."

"I need to start another bag, then."

"Fine." The vet hesitated. "Anything else?"

"Not so far."

"Let me know." And he left.

That was odd, Mariellen thought. *Why didn't he wait for me to come up today? Wonder if there's some animal he's especially concerned about. No, he'd've mentioned it.* She leaned down to open the next cage.

"What the hell!?" Her hand jerked back involuntarily and she dropped the sponge. There was something really disgusting here. She squatted on her heels and took a good look.

Pink. Pink and — stubbly? Was that stubble? Or...Mariellen leaned closer. No, not stubble. Pin feathers, maybe. Yes, there was the head: it was a bird, all right. But enormous, ungainly...A huge hooked beak, dark eyes showing through translucent lids...The skin was translucent too, with branching blue veins beneath the pink. Whatever it was, it was awfully young.

Mariellen opened the cage and extended her hand.

The eyes opened slowly, obsidian eyes rimmed with blue. For a long moment the bird studied Mariellen's hand, turning its head to look first with one eye and then the other. Mariellen held still. The head came closer, bobbing a little on the scrawny neck. Huge, taloned feet shuffled as it stood upright; naked wings flailed for balance. And then the head came to rest in Mariellen's outstretched palm and the shining eyes closed contentedly.

She flexed her fingers, stroking the hot skin at the huge bird's throat. It snuggled closer.

"What happened to you?" she crooned. "Why aren't you with your mama?"

She slowly withdrew her hand and the nestling, disappointed, opened its eyes again and got up on all fours to follow her.

All fours?!?

Mariellen blinked. It *couldn't* be! There must be two animals in that cage. But Dr. Saunders wouldn't put a cat in with a baby bird and besides—besides, it wasn't exactly a cat.

The — the *thing* — had come all the way to the front by now. And behind the wings it wasn't a bird at all, it was fuzzy and golden and flecked with brown. It had sturdy hind legs and a tasseled tail.

Mariellen felt as if she were going to vomit. For a moment she was so angry that her vision blurred.

To do this! To stitch together two unrelated species, to put animals through this kind of agony so some damned arrogant scientist could play God!

Artwork by Gail Butler

The monster teetered at the edge of its cage and squalled at her.

Mariellen sat down on the floor, gathered it into her lap, and wept.

She didn't hear Dr. Saunders on the stairs.

"Mariellen?"

She lifted her head and glared at him. "What sonofabitch did this?"

"Did what?"

"This! This — graft, this obscenity!"

"Oh. Nobody."

"*No*body?" *Don't give me that,* her tone said.

Dr. Saunders sighed. "The Tsantes family brought it in last night. They found it when they were vacationing in Greece. That is, they found an egg."

"An *egg*?"

The doctor nodded. "They thought it was an ostrich egg," he continued. "They took it home for a souvenir."

"There aren't any ostriches in Greece," Mariellen protested.

"I know that, you know that..." He shrugged. "They found this enormous egg, they figured it had to've come from an ostrich. So they took it."

Mariellen was silent. She could just picture it: the careless tourists on their holiday, the thoughtlessness with which they would rob a nest, break off chunks of living coral, carve their initials in the skin of a cactus that would still be quietly bleeding to death when they were safely and ignorantly home.... She held the creature in her lap more closely.

"They had it in a suitcase," Dr. Saunders was saying, "with a lot of underwear piled up around it so it wouldn't break. But it broke, all right." He smiled. "When they opened the suitcase there was nothing left of it but bloody bits of shell and wet membrane. And that." He pointed. "Mrs. Tsantes was hysterical."

"Serves her right," muttered Mariellen.

"Well, at least they didn't toss it into the nearest dumpster." Dr. Saunders was grinning now. "Do you have any idea what kind of animal that is?"

Mariellen shook her head.

"Unless I'm very much mistaken, it's a griffin."

"A — but that's mythology!" She squinted at him suspiciously. "Are you making this up?"

"See for yourself."

It was true. There was no scar where the naked bird body ended and the fuzzy lion body began. The golden down began almost imperceptibly just behind the wings and gradually grew denser until the whole back of the body was covered with fur.

"What does it eat?" she asked.

"That's a good question. If it were a lion cub I'd put it on kitten formula. But raptors need raw meat, roughage..."

Mariellen considered. "I'll try it on formula first. If it won't accept that we can always switch over to meat."

"Sounds good to me," said the vet.

The griffin eyed Mariellen curiously.

"Think I'm your mother, do you?" she asked. "All right. Here comes breakfast." *Now how on earth am I supposed to get a nipple into that beak?* she wondered. *Do griffins nurse their young? Well, it must eat something.* She sat cross-legged on the floor again and took the little griffin into her lap. "All right, now..." She nudged the nipple against the corner of the oversized beak. "Aren't you going to open? Come on..." She squeezed out a few drops of formula, hoping against hope that

some of it would penetrate. "You don't have to look at me like that. Here, I'll wipe it off, okay?" She decided against trying to force the beak open; all that would accomplish, she suspected, would be the donation of a couple of fingers toward this infant's first meal.

She set the bottle down. "A bottle baby you are not," she muttered. "Let's try you on some meat."

By the time she got back with the meat Mariellen imagined the griffin was beginning to weaken. How long had it been without food? Since last night, at least. There would have been some residual nourishment from the yolk sac, but surely that must be gone by now. She cut the beef into narrow strips and went back downstairs.

As soon as the griffin saw the meat it began to squall. "Got the right stuff this time, did I?" she asked it. "Okay, open wide." She unlatched the cage and the griffin came scrambling out, not waiting to be lifted. She dangled a strip of meat. It gulped it down without hesitation, gaping for more. Mariellen laughed. "Call you anything, but don't call you late for lunch, huh?" The griffin paid no attention; it was too busy eating. It ate three pounds of stewing beef before it was satisfied.

"Success!"

"Hm?"

"The griffin. He ate for me."

"Wonderful!" The vet smiled. "You'd better call the Tsanteses, let them know."

"All right."

"What's the matter?"

"It's just — they don't really want him, do they? I mean, he was an accident..."

"They're the ones who brought him in."

"Well, yes, I know. But — "

"Give them a call."

"All right," Mariellen said again. Dr. Saunders was right, of course; the griffin belonged to the Tsantes family. But they didn't want him. All they wanted was an ostrich egg to put on their damned mantelpiece. Just because they'd brought him to the vet didn't mean they wanted him back. It was going to be like the time those bastards brought the ocelot in. She just knew it.

The ocelot had been a beloved exotic pet until it grew up and began wrecking the house. The owners had had it declawed — not by Dr. Saunders — and the wounds had become infected, gangrenous. The only way to save the animal's life had been to amputate some of its toes.

And when Mariellen had called to tell the owners that their ocelot would live, all that had mattered to them was that it wasn't beautiful any more. It had been Mariellen's lot to hold the warm, breathing body in her arms as Dr. Saunders put it to death.

Now there was this griffin. Hell, the Tsanteses hadn't wanted a pet to begin with! And — Mariellen had to admit it — the griffin was far from beautiful.

She sighed. Might as well make the call and get it over with.

"Manny?" Mariellen could hear Mrs. Tsantes faintly in the distance. "Would you take this call? It's the vet."

In a moment Mr. Tsantes was on the line. "Yes?"

"I'm just calling to let you know that the — uh — animal you brought in last night is doing fine." Mariellen tried to sound enthusiastic. "We've got him eating."

"Oh, Jesus," said Mr. Tsantes.

"Pardon?"

"I thought the thing would die."

"He didn't," said Mariellen succinctly.

"Oh, Jesus." There was a pause. "Listen, can't you find somebody else to take that thing? We don't want it."

"I see." Mariellen thought, *Why the hell didn't you think of that before you brought it home?* "We'll do what we can," she said.

The griffin was huddled in the back of its cage, sleeping off its meal. Mariellen squatted to peer in at it, but it didn't move. She wondered how it would sleep when it grew up. Would it put its head behind its wing like a bird? Or sleep tail over nose like a big cat? She wondered if it would be allowed to live long enough for anybody to find out. Damn those people anyway.

She got slowly to her feet and went to give the bad news to Dr. Saunders.

The vet nodded. "Well, we expected this," he said.

"Are you — ? I mean, you're not going to — ?"

"I certainly hope not."

Mariellen didn't pursue it; she knew the answers as well as he did. A veterinarian's office was not a shelter or a free boarding facility. Every charity case took up cage space that was intended for use by paying clients. But Dr. Saunders was speaking.

"What?"

"I said, I don't suppose you'd want to take him."

"Me?"

"He'd have to stay here for a while, of course. Until we're sure he's stable. But after that — " He shrugged and looked at her hopefully. "Take a few days; think it over."

"I — " Mariellen was silent. She was thinking of how helpless the griffin was, how dependent on their mercy. She was remembering its deep, glowing eyes, the trusting weight of its head in her open hand. "It's a wild animal," she said. "It ate three pounds of meat this morning and it's only a baby. It's going to be enormous, isn't it?"

"I would think so."

It trusts me, thought Mariellen; *in this whole world, I'm all it's got.*

"Do you suppose it could be trained? Housebroken?"

"I don't know."

It trusts me, but can I trust it? she was thinking. *What will it do to my house? What will it do to my life?*

"What about Hawk?" she said.

"Oh, I don't think Hawk would hurt him, do you?"

"That wasn't what I meant. Hawk may be a humongous Doberman, but you know what he's like. I could come home some day and find this cute little griffin picnicking on my dog."

The vet snorted. "If I know Hawk, he'll have it following him around like a puppy."

"Well, maybe."

"You don't have to decide right away," he reminded her.

"I know." But on some level that had nothing to do with reason, Mariellen knew that her decision had already been made.

For the rest of that week Mariellen's mood swung wildly from excited anticipation to horrified dread. Assuming responsibility for a large, carnivorous wild animal of unknown propensities was utterly insane. Whenever she allowed herself to imagine what the griffin might be like when it was full grown, she knew that she couldn't possibly go through with it. But when the griffin squalled at the sound of her voice, when it scrambled into her lap and nestled there, she felt a wave of protective love that overcame all reason. At those times she positively looked forward to bringing the little thing home, to giving it the comparative freedom of her small apartment. She pic-

tured it basking in the sunlight and playing with Hawk.

After all, she assured herself, *he's perfectly gentle now. Look how carefully he takes his meat from my hand.*

At the beginning of the second week Mariellen took the griffin home.

By this time the tips of the pinfeathers had burst and the naked pink bird body was covered with a fine golden down. The griffin's front half looked ridiculously like an oversized Easter chick. On a diet of raw meat sprinkled with bone meal and powdered vitamins it had grown alarmingly: When Mariellen held it in her lap now, the lion half spilled over onto the floor.

Dr. Saunders had lent her a large airline carrier to take the griffin home in. Now he helped her load it into the back seat of a cab. Mariellen was barely able to squeeze in beside it.

The cabbie glanced over his shoulder. "Big dog, huh?"

"No," Mariellen smiled, "it's a griffin."

The cabbie maintained an offended silence for the rest of the trip. When they arrived Mariellen had to wrestle the carrier out of the cab by herself.

"Well, here we are," she said.

The griffin didn't respond. It was turning its head from side to side, blinking in the sunlight.

"I don't know how I'm supposed to get you up the stairs." She stooped and began to drag the carrier toward her building. Once inside she stopped to consider.

"Three flights...can you climb?" She opened the carrier. "Come on, then."

The griffin stepped out slowly. Its eyes were huge and its tail twitched.

"It's all right," Mariellen soothed.

The griffin looked up at her and made a twittering sound she hadn't heard before.

She laughed. "That's right; we're home." She lifted the empty carrier into her arms. "Follow me, now."

For a moment the griffin stood watching Mariellen ascend. Then it humped itself along behind her, wings flailing uselessly. By the time they reached the top of the first flight both were panting.

"A fine pair we make," Mariellen said. "Tell you what. If I join the gym, will you come too?"

The griffin gulped and shut its beak.

"Rested already, are you? All right, let's go. Two more flights."

Hawk was whining softly on the other side of the door.

The griffin was familiar with dogs, of course, but he'd never met one face to face without bars in between. If Hawk came bounding out on top of him now, Mariellen was afraid he might try to run away.

"Let's put you in your carrier, all right?" But it wasn't all right; there was no way the griffin was going back into that thing. When Mariellen persisted it ruffled up its feathers and clacked its beak at her.

"Oh, hell." She put her hands on her hips. "What am I going to do with you? Hawk has to go out." Maybe she could get hold of Hawk's collar as she opened the door..."Well, here goes."

She turned the key, cracked the door open and made a wild grab for Hawk as he hurtled by. She missed, but the griffin didn't: before she could react, it had fastened its beak in Hawk's shoulder. Hawk screamed.

"Dammit!" Mariellen managed to lock her hands around the griffin's throat and pull it away from Hawk before it could do any more damage. She was glad to see that the dog was sensibly keeping his distance.

She loosened her hold slowly, keeping one wary hand on the griffin's neck. It seemed calmer now that Hawk had retreated, but she didn't dare let go. She maneuvered it through the open door, reached in for Hawk's leash and shut the door in the griffin's face.

With his enemy out of sight Hawk came to Mariellen to be leashed. But he kept looking nervously at the door and his flanks were quivering.

"You poor thing," she said, stroking his head. "What did that nasty griffin do to you, hm?" She checked him over briefly. There was an ugly gash on his shoulder, but aside from that he seemed to be all right. "Let's get you out first; then we'll clean you up, okay?"

Hawk looked up at her and wagged his tail once. *I hear you,* the wag said, *but I'm not happy.*

He favored his left foreleg all the way down the stairs.

As she walked her dog, Mariellen had ample time to regret her decision to bring the griffin home. What had poor Hawk done to deserve this?

Well, yes, he had come rushing out the door. But he hadn't been heading for the griffin, he'd been coming straight toward — Mariellen stopped in her tracks, causing Hawk to turn and look questioningly back. Could it be? Was it possible that the griffin had been protecting her?

After all, it had never reacted one way or the other to the dogs it had seen at work. Maybe she was being too hasty. In any case, the office would be closed by now; she wouldn't be able to bring it back until morning anyway.

"All finished, Hawk? Come on, let's go home."

Mariellen opened the door a crack and peered inside. The griffin was nowhere in sight. As she stepped over the threshold Hawk braced his legs and pulled back against the leash.

"Come *on,* Hawk! It's all right, fella; he's not here." Where *was* he, anyway? She hauled Hawk inside and shut the door. The dog pressed against her, quivering. No point in keeping him leashed; he'd only be at a disadvantage if the griffin attacked him again. When she turned him loose he shrank back against the door, looking at her pleadingly. "Don't worry, sweetheart," she said. "I won't let him get you." *At least I hope I won't.*

She tiptoed through her apartment, looking into corners and underneath furniture. Was it always so quiet in here? Mariellen could hear herself breathe. Behind her, at the door, Hawk whined once and was silent. She entered the bedroom.

And there, curled up on the bed, was the griffin. It was such an anticlimax that she almost laughed.

Griffins did sleep with their tails wrapped around them, she noted; but they put their heads behind their wings like birds too.

Hawk didn't meet the griffin again until evening. The griffin, rested and fed, was enthroned on Mariellen's bed like a pasha. When Mariellen called Hawk in, all it did was look at him with each eye in turn and ruffle its feathers contentedly, clucking like a whole barnyard full of chickens. Hawk advanced a step, sniffing audibly. When nothing happened he rested his big head on the bed.

"*Good* Hawk," Mariellen crooned. "What a good *boy*!" The griffin edged closer to Hawk, stretched out its long neck and began to nibble around his ears with its hooded, yellow beak. Hawk closed his eyes.

Mariellen let out the breath she'd been holding. This was going to work. It was actually going to work!

"Hawk," she said, "allow me to introduce you to our new griffin."

Before she went to bed Mariellen shut

Hawk out of the room, lifted the griffin onto the newspapers she'd spread in a corner and waited until it had used them. So that was all right.

As she went out with the soiled papers Hawk came trotting back in, went straight to his bed and curled up with a sigh. The griffin had clearly chosen to sleep on Mariellen's bed; it was already climbing back up, using its beak as well as its claws.

When Mariellen got under the covers it snuggled close, draping its neck around hers like a feather boa. In the middle of the night she half awoke to find the griffin preening her as it had Hawk; dozing off again she dreamed that her mother's careful hands were combing and braiding her hair, strand by strand.

In no time at all it seemed as if Mariellen had always lived with the griffin. After the first couple of weeks she left the bedroom door open when she went to work; her two pets had become such good friends that she no longer worried that they might hurt each other in her absence.

The griffin had, of course, continued to grow. In a month's time it was taller and longer than Hawk. When it got up on the bed now it no longer climbed, but sprang, half spreading its wings. Mariellen wondered how much longer her bed was going to take it.

Its appetite had grown, too. Mariellen tried to interest it in Hawk's kibble, but all it would eat was meat — pounds and pounds of stewing beef, liver and kidneys. "I spend more on you than I do on myself," Mariellen told it. "Do you know that?" But the griffin just came closer and ruffled its head feathers. "Oh, all right, I'll scratch you."

Even in its first plumage the griffin was a beautiful beast. Mariellen's fingers almost disappeared in the dense golden crest that crowned its head. Its eyes, half closed with pleasure, were the color of honey bathed in sunlight; they could outstare the sun and see in the dark. At night they glowed like a cat's.

The wing feathers were chocolate brown with a fringe of gold. Behind the wings the lion body had grown long and angular, with claws to rival the talons up front.

Mariellen hadn't dared to take the griffin outside.

Her landlord had never made any trouble about Hawk, but she had an idea that he might not be too happy if he found out he had a griffin on his premises. Besides, there were laws about keeping exotic pets in the city — and the griffin was certainly exotic.

Nevertheless, Mariellen knew that she couldn't keep such a large animal cooped up forever. Somehow she was going to have to let it get out and exercise.

The solution occurred to her one morning as she was walking Hawk. Even now, with the season so far advanced, it was just beginning to get light when she left for work. What if she set the alarm for an hour earlier and gave Hawk and the griffin a good romp in the park? Nobody was on the streets at that hour. Well, almost nobody. Mariellen did not permit herself to think about the muggers and rapists that kept nice people from going into the park when it was dark outside. Presumably the sight of Hawk would keep them at bay. And if it didn't..."Would you protect me?" she asked the griffin. "Would you understand if somebody threatened me?" With any luck she wouldn't have to find out.

The following morning Mariellen leashed Hawk, stepped out into the hall with him and held the door open for the griffin to follow. It came as far as the threshold and stopped.

"Come on," Mariellen invited. The griffin took a step back. "Do I have to put a leash on you?" Hawk was whining, wondering why she was taking so long. "This is ridiculous," Mariellen muttered. And she stepped behind the griffin, pushed it over the threshold and slammed the door.

Immediately all hell broke loose. The griffin, turning to retreat from the big scary world outside, found its way blocked. Panic-stricken, it flung itself against the door, squalling loudly and leaving long scratch marks on the paint. Mariellen was afraid it would break its neck.

She reached for the doorknob just as it leaped again. Its talons closed on her forearm and sank in like daggers. "Oh, shit!" With one desperate heave she got the door open and stumbled inside, almost falling over the griffin as it streaked in ahead of her.

Clutching her bleeding arm she made her way to the bathroom. The arm looked pretty bad and it was starting to hurt like hell, but she could flex her fingers all right: she didn't think any nerves or tendons had been damaged.

In all the excitement Hawk had been forgotten in the hall. When Mariellen got around to looking for him she discovered that in his anxiety he had deposited a large, smelly load on the landing.

Evidently, she thought as she went back in for paper towels, *this is not going to be my day.*

It was several days before all three of them were recovered enough to experiment with the great outdoors again.

This time Mariellen was less ambitious. She reasoned that it might be easier and safer to take the griffin out onto the fire escape first.

On Sunday morning, after Hawk had been walked, Mariellen opened the fire escape window, climbed out and called to the griffin. As she'd hoped, the streets were relatively empty. Few people bothered to get up this early on Sundays.

The griffin came to the window willingly enough. Resting its head on the sill, it cocked one bright eye at the sky and the other at the sunlit sidewalk below. Mariellen patted the bars beneath her and kept calling. The griffin's head lifted and craned outward and finally one taloned foot advanced to the windowsill and clung there. "What a brave fellow! Come on, then!" There was a flutter of wings and the whole enormous eagle body stood framed in Mariellen's window.

It was fascinating to watch the griffin look around. Mariellen was used to Hawk's superior senses of hearing and scent, but she'd never been around an animal that was visually superior to her before. Not only could the griffin look directly at the sun without discomfort, it was clearly watching things that Mariellen couldn't see. Its head snapped around, now this way, now that, following — what? a bird? a plane? Mariellen giggled. With a griffin in her life, anything seemed possible.

"So? Are you going to come out?" As if it had understood, the griffin stepped forward, bringing the remainder of its improbable body into view. Bathed in sunlight it ruffled its feathers, half spread its wings and basked.

Now that the griffin had discovered the joys of the fire escape it wanted to be out there all the time. Mariellen would go about her housework with the window open, the griffin's long, tasseled tail hanging over the sill like a bell pull.

Once she heard a child's voice from below: "Mommy! Look at that big bird on that fire escape!"

And the mother's bored response: "It's stone; they put it there for decoration."

"It *moved*, Mommy! I *saw* it!"

"Don't be silly. Come on. You're going to make us late."

"But I *saw* it, Mommy!" The child's wails of protest faded out, presumably as its mother dragged it off.

Mariellen grinned. *A good thing,* she reflected, *that adults don't usually look at anything above their own eye level.* But this couldn't go on forever. Sooner or later the griffin was going to be discovered, and then what?

It was time to have another try at bringing the griffin to the park.

Mariellen didn't make the mistake of trying to rush the griffin again. After Hawk's walk she shut him in the bedroom, propped open the hall door and encouraged the griffin to venture out.

It was a slow business. Here there was no expanse of bright sky to entice the griffin, only a long, shadowy hallway with an abyss at the end where the stairs began. In the space of a half hour it had advanced no farther than the welcome mat.

Mariellen persisted. On subsequent mornings she fed the griffin out in the hall, moving closer and closer to the stairs until she finally had it going down a full flight to get its meat.

Now that the hall was familiar territory the griffin began, quite literally, to spread its wings. Mariellen's apartment, with its small, cluttered rooms, wasn't big enough to accommodate its full wingspan, but the hallway was. It began by stretching, went on to flapping and eventually startled both Mariellen and itself by taking momentarily to the air. It made such a ruckus over this accomplishment that Mariellen had to hustle it back into her apartment before it woke up all the neighbors.

The very next morning it launched itself halfway down the stairs and glided to the landing below, never touching down once.

"So you really can fly," Mariellen said. "What's going to happen when we go to the park? Are you going to come back to me?" It was something to think about. A griffin wasn't the sort of animal one could walk on a leash. Even if she could improvise a harness, Mariellen suspected that the griffin could overpower her with no trouble at all. Either it would stay with her of its own free will — or it wouldn't.

That night she dreamed that she had the griffin out in the park. It sailed up into the sky, shedding golden sparkles from its wings, higher and higher until it melted into the clouds and was gone. She reached futilely after it and it was there after all, a warm conglomeration of feathers and fur. Mariellen smiled in her sleep, her happy arms full of griffin.

It was still shadowy outside when they arrived at the park. The griffin, reveling in its new-found powers, had sailed down all three flights of stairs without hesitation and followed Mariellen out onto the street.

Once they reached the park, however, it hung back, squalling and jittering.

"You're not much for novelty, are you?" Mariellen asked it. "All right, you can look from there." She returned to where the griffin had stopped and stood beside it, gently scratching around its head. After awhile its eyes glazed contentedly and it began to make clucking noises in its throat. "See? Nothing's going to hurt you here." She advanced again and this time the griffin followed.

It was strange to see it picking its way over the dewy grass. *I've never seen him in a natural setting before,* Mariellen thought; *only against a backdrop of man-made things. And even this isn't right for him, all this green...*

Except for the tip of its tail the griffin stood perfectly still. In the first rays of the rising sun it shimmered like a figure picked out in gold thread on a medieval tapestry.

Mariellen looked at her watch. "Come on," she said, "it's time we were getting back." The griffin twittered, staring up into the distance. "I have to bribe you, huh? That's what I like about you: you're so docile and obedient." She pulled a plastic bag of meat strips out of her pocket. "How does breakfast sound? Ah, now I have your attention, do I?" She fed the griffin a piece of meat. "No, you don't get any more till we're moving. That's a good griffin. What a good boy!"

It was a great relief to Mariellen to have assured herself that the griffin would follow if she lured it with meat. Apart from assuaging her fear that she might lose her pet, it meant that now she could consolidate both her morning outings. Long before sunup the next day she clipped a leash on Hawk, put the griffin's breakfast in her pocket and headed for the park.

Afterwards Mariellen was to remember that summer as a sort of honeymoon with the griffin. The dark untenanted streets, the early morning hush, breathed magic.

When they got to the park she would let Hawk run loose. The big dog would race in joyous circles as the griffin scurried along behind flapping its wings to keep up. Then, panting, sides heaving, they would collapse together onto the cool grass. Sitting there with them Mariellen would hear the dawn chorus of the birds. It was like being in the center of a crystal cup: a vibration of silvery chirps beginning at the rim of the world and swelling until it filled the sky.

Then the sun would rise. All the silver and black would dissolve into color, the flat silhouettes of trees solidifying into shifting masses of green. In the low, slanting light the grass glowed in multiple transparencies, crisscrossed by its own shadows.

And Hawk's amber eyes, the griffin's golden ones, would be looking into Mariellen's with love.

Little by little the griffin learned to fly. It had been half spreading its wings to sail down the stairs for some time now, but that was more like parachuting or hang gliding than real flying; Mariellen had never seen it even attempt to take off from level ground. She was beginning to doubt that it could.

But in these morning romps with Hawk the griffin kept extending its wings as it ran and one day it achieved just the right combination of angle and groundspeed to take to the air. It was only up for a moment, so astonished at itself that its legs kept running as it flew. Mariellen laughed aloud. It looked like a cartoon character that hadn't yet realized that it had run over the brink of a cliff.

When it landed in a tangled heap of wings and claws, she lavished praise and reassurance in equal measure as she helped it get its mismatched parts reorganized. "What a *good* griffin! What an *exceptional* griffin! Here, that's your foot holding your wing down. Let me just — *that's* the way! Better now?" The griffin picked up a strand of her hair and preened it absently, as if returning the favor. But its eyes had a distant look and it kept turning its head, now this way and now that, to look up at the sky.

Sure enough, the next morning it began practicing in earnest. As soon as it began to run its wings were in motion, angling against the wind for the magical combination of speed and thrust that would bear it aloft again. Every now and

Artwork by Gail Butler

then it would spring straight up from its muscular hindquarters, wings flapping futilely.

Not until it had reduced itself to a state of panting, glassy-eyed exhaustion was Mariellen able to approach. "You're trying too hard," she told it. "We all know you can fly." The griffin bowed its golden head, ruffling its crest to ask for petting. Its wings stood out from its body as it tried to cool itself; Mariellen could feel the heat rising from its breast.

What must it be like, she wondered, to have a gift and not know how to use it? To be defeated by the very arduousness of your attempts?

She stood for a long time stroking and soothing the griffin before she called Hawk to be leashed and started back home.

It said a lot for the griffin's intelligence, Mariellen thought, that it seemed to pace itself after that. It still tried to fly, but there was no frenzy now. Watching it was like watching an athlete in training. It put itself through a sort of exercise routine, stretching, flexing and beating its great wings before it tried to get off the ground. Sometimes it succeeded, sometimes it didn't. But it always left time to play with Hawk before the sun got too high and they had to go home.

The sun was rising later now. In no time at all it was going to be too cold in the mornings to stay out very long. But as the darkness gradually closed in Mariellen was able to prolong the griffin's outings in the park without too much worry about being seen.

They had been incredibly lucky so far, she realized. On the few occasions on which someone had actually seen the griffin the reaction had been one of startled disbelief. No curiosity, no overtures of friendship, no panic: just a quick double take followed by a casual saunter across the street. *As if,* Mariellen thought with amusement, *putting a double line of parked cars between you and the big, wild beast would do any good.*

But no one had screamed, no one had alerted the police...no one had made trouble.

In fact, the nearest thing there had been to "trouble" had been Mariellen's friends, who couldn't understand why she never wanted to go out and do things with them any more. "What do you mean, you're going to bed? It's only 8:30, for god's sake! Are you sick? Do you want me to come over? I know you have to be at work early, but you never used to go to bed at — oh, all right. I'll talk to you Saturday, okay?"

Sometimes Mariellen thought she should just tell them about the griffin and get it over with, but somehow she never did. Working with animals, that was okay, that was her livelihood. Owning Hawk — well, that was okay too: Hawk was, theoretically at least, her protector. But sharing her home with a griffin... *What do you need it for?* she imagined them asking. *It's big, it's expensive, it's damned inconvenient — hell, it's probably illegal!* Mariellen smiled. It was all true, no question about it. But they'd have it backwards if they put it like that. The real question, the only one that mattered, was not whether she needed a griffin but whether this particular griffin needed her.

Besides, Mariellen happened to love her particular griffin. But she was quite

certain that her friends wouldn't understand that either.

Four-thirty. They had almost two hours before the sky grew light. Mariellen turned Hawk loose, watching his breath stream behind him in misty banners as he ran. The griffin skimmed along in pursuit. He was getting pretty good at this, Mariellen noted. His air time was longer every day. He still lost altitude from time to time, but all he needed to do was kick off with his strong lion's legs to be aloft again. Now and then he'd make a playful dive, talons reaching for Hawk's hindquarters, and Hawk would yelp and put on more speed. *He's not really frightened,* Mariellen thought. *He knows the griffin would never hurt him.* And indeed, the next time the griffin dove, Hawk flung himself to the ground and allowed his friend to "catch" him, striking up with his forelegs and snapping at the air as the griffin parried with its beak.

Mariellen felt as if she could watch them forever.

They were resting when the sun rose. The summer chorus of birds had been silent for some time now: without young to rear and territories to defend, the birds no longer heralded the dawn. Against the slowly lightening sky the trees took on form and color, shaggy clumps of yellow and scarlet now instead of green. The wind picked up, blowing leaves like confetti.

It was going to rain again. The gulls had assembled on the lake as they always did before a storm. As Mariellen watched, one detached itself from the flock and winged toward them, keening.

Suddenly she felt the griffin tense under her hand. She glanced down just as it sprang away, eyes fixed on the gull. It leaped once, twice; then the huge wings beat down against the solid air and carried it out over the lake.

Hawk was on his feet, whining excitedly.

In slow motion the griffin rose, wheeled, hovered over the gull and plummeted to strike.

A flurry of feathers exploded from the griffin's talons and was carried away by the wind: white leaves flecked with red.

"Griffin!" Mariellen called. "Griffin! Come back!"

But this time there was no awakening, no warm griffin snuggled in her arms to comfort her. She screamed again, her throat tight with unshed tears.

The griffin flapped heavily to the shore. There it crouched, oblivious of Mariellen, mantling over its prey. When she tried to approach, it turned to face her, hissing like a cat. Its eyes were wild.

Oh, God, what am I going to do? She pulled her bag of meat strips out of her pocket and waved it temptingly, but the griffin showed no interest. It had the gull torn open now and was ravaging it with its hooked beak, tearing and gulping. When it lifted its head its cheeks were sticky with blood. *The sun is up,* Mariellen thought. *The sun is up and people will be coming.*

"Griffin," she pleaded, "please!" The griffin paid no attention.

The first spectators arrived.

"All right, calm down. Where is he now?"

Mariellen blew her nose and clutched the receiver as if it were a lifeline. "Here," she said, "with me. They wanted to shoot him, but I wouldn't get out of the way and when they grabbed hold of me, Hawk — " she choked.

"I know," Dr. Saunders said, "they had it on the news. He'll be all right; it was only a tranquilizer dart."

"But they took him away!" Mariellen wailed. "He's waking up somewhere in a cage, all alone — !" She started sobbing again.

"He'll be all right," the vet repeated. "He's licensed, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"Good. Then they can't keep him when you come to claim him. Anybody can see he's not a vicious dog."

"He was trying to protect me."

"And he did. He did a great job. Was that when you got the griffin away?"

"Uh-huh. He — after they sh-shot Hawk they picked him up to put him in a cage and while they were busy I took the gull away. He was almost finished. He didn't care any more."

"And then he followed you?"

Mariellen nodded. "Yes. He was still hungry. I showed him the meat..."

"Right through all those people, huh?"

"Yes." To her surprise, Mariellen giggled. "They got out of the way."

"I'll bet they did."

"But it's no good," Mariellen said, suddenly tearful again; "They know now; they followed us. Everybody *knows.*"

"I know." There was a long pause. "Look, I can't stay on now. People will be coming in."

"Who's going to clean all the — ?"

"I will. Don't worry about it, you've got enough to deal with over there. I'll call you back at eleven, okay?"

"Okay. Thanks."

"Sit tight." And he hung up.

Mariellen moved over to the window and pulled a corner of the curtain aside. They were still out there, all those people. *What's the matter with them?* Mariellen asked herself angrily. *Don't any of them have jobs to go to?*

She missed Hawk, missed his solid dependability, the way he would suddenly be at her side waiting humbly for her to notice him. She missed the feel of his warm, flat forehead under her hand.

She let the curtain fall, turned and nearly fell over the griffin.

"This is all your fault," she told it, "do you know that?"

The griffin chirred and stood on tiptoe, stretching its long neck to put its head on her shoulder.

"Oh, leave me alone." She turned her back on it and went to sit on the bed. *What am I going to do?* she wondered. *How am I going to get Hawk back? What if the police come with a warrant and break down the door? How am I going to keep them from taking the griffin away? What's going to become of us all?*

There was a shuffling sound from the living room, followed by a thud. Mariellen went to look. The griffin had squeezed behind an armchair and was huddled in the corner, moaning to itself. Mariellen had thought the morning could hold no further misery, but in that first instant of utter panic she knew how wrong she had been. Was the griffin sick? Had the gull somehow poisoned him? Pushing the chair aside, she knelt beside the griffin, lifting its head in her hands. It looked up at her with one golden eye and a tear slid down its beak onto her wrist.

"So that's it," she whispered. "You miss him too." And she pulled the griffin close and held it in her arms until it slept.

The ringing of the telephone awakened them both. Untangling herself from the griffin, Mariellen made her way groggily across the room and lifted the receiver.

"Dr. Saunders here. Sorry I'm late."

Mariellen yawned. "That's okay."

"I've been making some calls. How would you like to work for an animal shelter? In the country?"

"I don't *want* to put him in a shelter!"

"What?"

"The griffin. I'm not putting him in a shelter."

"No, no. The griffin will live with you and Hawk. In a trailer."

"Oh." Mariellen came fully awake. "Would you mind starting over, please?"

"There's a no-kill shelter in Pennsylvania looking for a full time caretaker. They only pay minimum wage, but you'd get a trailer, free utilities, a big garden..."

"Do they know about the griffin?"

"Their consulting veterinarian is an old classmate of mine. (A very good vet, by the way.) I've told him everything. He feels you're exactly the sort of person they've been looking for. Overqualified, of course..."

"Would the griffin be able to — to run free there?"

"Not during adoption hours. But the rest of the time — yes. The nearest town is about ten miles away."

"I'll take it," said Mariellen.

The vet laughed. "So fast? Don't you want to know how big the shelter is? What you'll have to do?"

Mariellen shook her head impatiently. "It doesn't matter. It's the only way, don't you see?"

"Yes. You're right, of course. If you stay here, they won't let you live. I — you do have other options, you know. I'm sure any zoo would be delighted to —"

"You know damned well that I wouldn't put the griffin in a zoo."

"I didn't think you would." The vet's voice was warm. "I'll tell the shelter manager to call you and make all the arrangements, then?"

"Yes. Please." Mariellen took a deep breath to steady her voice. "I'm going to miss working for you, Dr. Saunders."

"I'll miss you too. Those people in Pennsylvania don't know how lucky they're about to get."

"Thanks," said Mariellen. And then she hung up because she was afraid she was going to start crying again.

The trees had already lost their leaves up here and it was cold. Mariellen swung open the trailer door, breathing deeply of the forest-scented air. Hawk bounded down the steps, cocked his leg against the nearest clump of weeds and danced back to her, barking excitedly.

"Yes, yes, we're coming." She glanced into the dim interior of the trailer. "Well, lazybones?" The griffin's head appeared in the doorway. "Spoiled rotten, that's your problem. What do I have to do, start waking you up at four o'clock in the morning again?" The griffin shook itself, ruffling its feathers. Its long tail trailed behind as it descended the steps. "Disgraceful, that's what you are." Mariellen moved the griffin's tail out of the way so she could close the door. She had to admit, it was nice not to have to get up in the middle of the night any more. Nice to be able to sleep until a reasonable hour, like a normal person. Not, she thought ruefully, that her life was ever likely to approximate what anybody would call "normal" again.

By now the griffin had relieved itself on the same clump of weeds Hawk had used and was starting to perk up. Hawk barked in its face and tore away, inviting it to chase him. The griffin stretched, first one wing, then the other, shook itself again and galloped clumsily after the big dog.

Mariellen settled herself on the trailer's steps to watch.

Twice they circled, three times, and then the griffin took to the air, spiraling upward. Into the brilliant morning sky it rose, golden in the sunlight. And even when it was only visible as a bright speck against the blue, the sound of its voice came faintly back to them, crying out its joy.

❧

Barbara Rosen brings to this story her own experiences of working for the ASPCA and rescuing strays. She says, "I'm married to a Griffin; I've wanted to write a griffin story for some time." An ex-school-teacher, she lives in Brooklyn. This is her third story in *FANTASY Magazine*.

Gail Butler has two favorite media of expression: her artwork and the telephone. She's sometimes called "the Jewish mother of Northwest fandom". Among her hobbies is the study of biology.

Winners of the *Cauldron* voting for issue 17

Stories:

- ✦ First Place: **"The Unjust Curse" – Patricia D. Cirone**
- ✦ Second Place: **"The Gift of Death"– Glenn DeTurk**
- ✦ Third Place: **"The Master of Kanthuri" – Dorothy J. Heydt**

Artists:

- ✦ First Place: **Rob Alexander – for "The Master of Kanthuri"**
- ✦ Second Place: **Margaret Organ-Kean – for "The Gift of Death"**
- ✦ Third Place: **Barb Armata – for "The Riddle Trial"**

Winners of the *Cauldron* voting for issue 18

Stories:

- ✦ First Place: **"Glasswings" – D. Lopes Heald**
- ✦ Second Place: **"Queeneyes" – eluki bes shahar**
- ✦ Third Place: **"The Witch's Child" – Patricia Duffy Novak**

Artists:

- ✦ First Place: **Gail Butler – for "Death Test"**
- ✦ Second Place: **Barb Armata – for "The Witch's Child"**
- ✦ Third Place: **Sandra Templeton – for "Queeneyes"**

The Theban Fix

by Karen Anderson

I was in a fine Theban fix, all right. As I waited for the charcoal in the outdoor grill to come to the right stage, I kept telling myself over and over how I came to be in it. Usually I reserve that kind of thing for three a.m.

I strode back and forth on the little terrace, with its view down rocks and trees (screening the superhighway), across lakes and fields, and over the Gulf of Eubœa. My British great-grandfather built this house to live in while he translated the Theban Plays of Sophocles. Behind me, over the ridge to the west, were the old road and Thebes itself, Thee-vai they pronounce it now, thiev-ai is what they are. I had only been here a week, but I loved the house and hated Thebans. At least, I hated Spyros Nikolaides and the men who worked for him; I suppose the rest were all right.

I couldn't prove I was Gran's heir because Mom was adopted. And there were no papers, which meant *that* kind of "adopted." And Mom's father was probably — no, certainly — the man the land was leased from, *kyrios* Nikolaides. Which made the current landlord, Spyros Nikolaides, my cousin. Damn him for a Theban! He had a couple of workmen, Yanni and Theo, already tearing out brush. Damn them, too.

Why, Lucy Dickensheet, *why* didn't you stay in Oakland? You might have gotten the Mills College job next fall!

I poured another ouzo, scarfed more cucumber chunks and olives and opened another Fix.

Unlikely as it sounds, Fix is a well-known beer from a brewery founded by a German named Fick. They even spell it with Roman letters: FIX. It's the best beer in Greece. Gran wrote me once that in the hippie 60s the bead-and-headband set used to snicker a lot about "getting a Fix". She had always written a lot to Mom, and after Mom and Dad died in an accident and I moved in with my uncle and aunt, she went on writing to me. It wasn't just a house that I wanted, it was *Gran's* house that I'd heard of all my life. And my cousin, the landlord, the local (and more than local) big wheel, was not only going to see that Gran's house didn't come to me, he was going to cancel the lease, tear it down, and build a resort.

The coals were getting there. Tomato salad, crusty bread, and a bowl of fresh figs were standing by. I laid a pair of fat mutton chops on the grill, the kind where there's a slice of kidney included, and brushed on seasoned olive oil with a sprig of thyme. Mom taught me Greek cooking as well as the language, both classical and modern.

There was still some Fix, but I needed more ouzo. While I was at it I splashed some as a libation on the ground by the Sphinx Rock. It didn't look much like one, but I had decided to call it that. It was big enough.

"Where are the Sphinxes now, when I really need one?" I demanded of it. "I want to fix those Thebans!" Oil graffiti suddenly seemed like a good idea. FIX THEBES, I'd write. I meant to put it in Greek, but the ouzo came between me and my linguistic gearshift, so I found I had used the thyme sprig to write English with Greek letters,

Φ I Ξ

standing out clearly on the rock. All right, then. I went back for more oil.

As I turned away from the rock, reaching for the oil, a sudden tremendous shiver went over me, and a rushing sound passed around me. Not an earthquake — there wasn't a tremor on the surface of the oil — and not a gust of wind, for there wasn't a leaf stirring.

I was afraid to turn around.

I turned around.

I fell to my knees, dropping the sprig and spilling more ouzo at her forepaws. Waves of cold shudders went up and down my back.

She was lion, she was eagle, she was goddess —

"Hail, ambrosial one..."I faltered. "*Chaire — kalispera...*" Damn it, was classical or modern Greek proper for a legendary monster?

"What is your quarrel with the people of Thebes?" she asked musically in American English.

"It's a long story, Ma'am," I said. I was beginning to breathe again. "May I offer you some refreshment?"

"You have done so, and I thank you for the libation. But tell me briefly, what is your quarrel?"

"I have a suit at law with a man of Thebes over the ownership of this house. The jury will know him and not me," I said.

Artwork by Nick Jainschigg

I was breathing, yes, but breathing the same air as the Theban Sphinx herself. Her breath had been cold and smelled of a stone-floored cellar at first, but now it was growing warmer, and her pelt was fluffing out of its stony smoothness. She had a woman's head, but she could break my neck with a single swat of one of those great forepaws. And she had sat at the side of the road to Thebes, asking every passerby a riddle, and killing him if he could not answer.

The story said that Œdipus had been the one to answer her, and she had flung herself down the mountainside to her death. That part hadn't seemed right — she could fly, after all. Had she simply sat on the mountainside, purposeless, until from stony stillness she had become nearly stone? And now, somehow, I had awakened her!

"I'm cooking some kidney chops. Would you like one?" After a couple of tries, I made it back to my feet.

"Your offering of it, and the smell of the burning fat in the fire, is sufficient. But tell me, how did you know the true name of my kind and invoke me by it?"

I goggled all over again, "Ma'am, I didn't. I was just writing an English word with Greek letters —"

"Yet you did it. I am a chthonic power of Bœotia, and in my own Bœotian Hellene the name of my kind is not Sfigx but Fix."

There was nothing else to do. I poured another ouzo and another Fix, took my chops off the fire, and ate my dinner. In company with the Fix.

"Do you have a personal name, Ma'am?" I ventured. "The stories just call you 'the Sphinx'. But there are other sphinxes in the Greek world, not to mention the Egyptian androsphinxes and criosphinxes."

"None given in love," she said. "But you —" She reached up a huge paw to my face. I froze while the leathery pad pressed against my forehead. "Your name is Lucy. And it is not. It is Lysistrata — Lysischolia — Lysimachia — Lysainigmata — so many names!"

"It's really Lysistrata, after Gran. But we'd make up names for each other for things we'd done. 'Lysischolia' was when I'd infected the entire fourth grade with measles. She liked all kinds of wordplay. I remember once she said you were called the Sphinx because you were the sphincter that constipated the road to Thebes."

It was the ouzo. When I'd said it, I couldn't believe I'd let that out. I felt hot and cold and sick.

But she laughed. She burst into full-throated guffaws, leaped straight up into the air, out of the shadow of the ridge and into the last sunlight, and turned three wing-flapping somersaults before gliding back down to the terrace still laughing.

"Mortal, I have never before laughed as the Olympians laugh. I will give you

another name: Lysigelasma — Looser of Laughter."

Before I knew it, I was hugging her. (It was *certainly* the ouzo.) "And I'll give you a name," I said. "Euptianousa, She who is good at setting things right. The Fixer!"

She hugged me back. She sat on her haunches and wrapped her huge forelegs around me and kissed my cheek. I kissed hers and then we started laughing and crying together.

That wasn't the ouzo, not for her, unless she was getting a contact high. No, I think it was just that I was the enemy of her enemy, and hence the only person around who was anything like a friend. We settled down on the terrace for a couple of hours, me eating figs, she breathing in their smell and my enjoyment and my wish to share. We told each other our stories: how she had been sent to give the Thebans a bad time till someone answered her riddle; how Thebes — well, Spyros the Theban — was giving me a bad time unless I could unriddle him. Or riddle him with bullets, maybe.

And we punned and riddled in every language I know. ("What makes the silver tycoon's breath so sweet?" "It's the Mint." That one was old when the Athenian silver-mines were called the Bay-Tree.) As I might have expected, she'd picked both the demotic and katharevusa forms of modern Greek out of the air she breathed. Naturally, she preferred the ultra-conservative katharevusa form to the demotic. (By the way, you can tell a newspaper's politics by whether the editorials use the dative case.) Eventually we were both yawning so that I bade her good night and melted into bed.

Next morning, Phosphorus was lingering to meet Aurora — excuse me, I mean the morning star was still visible in the sunrise colors — when I woke up. I didn't believe what I remembered. A remarkably detailed and consistent dream, of course, except for that nonsense about "Fix" being the Bœotian for "Sphinx"—

I washed my face and started coffee on autopilot. It was such a vivid dream. I sneaked a look out a window — no sphinxes in sight — but wouldn't I feel silly if I went out and hunted for Euptianousa?

I growled at myself and opened Great-grandfather's Liddell & Scott to the phi's. There it was: φιξ v. Σφιγξ.

I went outdoors and v.'d the Sphinx. Hastily, I went back in and waited for the coffee. By the time it was ready, I heard Yanni and Theo coming in their pickup. They were bringing chainsaws to take out the bigger oaks, so the bulldozer could scrape out a route to the superhighway. I poured a cup and went out to see what would happen.

Euptianousa was waiting to fix them, I saw. She was in the classic recumbent pose, her tail curled around one haunch. A winged lion, with a severely beautiful woman's face and high, round breasts. I sipped my coffee and watched as Yanni swung the truck around in a screeching arc, yelling something demotic to the effect of "Will ya look at those tits!"

Yanni was halfway out of the cab, but Theo was dragging him back, howling (also in demotic), "It's a lion, you dummy! We gotta get outa here!"

Then the Sphinx stood up and walked toward them, almost absentmindedly half-opening and resettling her wings.

"*Kyrie eleison*," said Yanni reverently, and Theo responded "*Christe eleison*."

She stopped, waiting, and they got out of the truck as if under a compulsion.

"If you be men of Thebes, I have a riddle for you," she said in Greek.

It broke the spell a little. "High-and-mighty," muttered Yanni, nudging Theo. "Notice the dative."

"Shut up, you fool! She can kill us!" Theo hissed.

"Is that true, *kyria*?" Yanni asked, a little more respectfully. I hadn't thought Yanni really respected anything that didn't involve internal combustion or explosives.

"Yes," she said with a smile that showed her teeth. "If you can't answer my riddle."

They looked at each other and shuffled their feet. "We're ready, *kyria* Sphinx," Theo said.

"What goes on four legs at sunrise, two at noonday, and three at nightfall?" she asked.

"Are you still using that one?" Yanni asked in surprise. "Man, of course."

She crouched and snarled. "You, the other one! Explain it!"

"Everyone knows that, *kyria* Sphinx," Theo said. "A baby, in the morning of life, crawls on all fours; a man in his noon strength walks on two legs; and in the nightfall of old age he leans on a stick."

"Go, then!" she roared, coming to her most regal pose. "I give you your lives, but let me never look on you again!"

They got in the truck and left, Yanni saying, "It's hard to argue with someone who uses datives like that."

The Nikolaides family hadn't been badly off before 1939, and after '45 did more than well. They wanted to out-British the British *kyria* (Gran, who translated Æschylus, educated Mom herself) and sent Spyros to school in England. He'd found Oxford boring and insisted on the London School of Economics. He said it showed him how Socialists really operate. Now he was going to come up here to see what was going on, and I thought it would take more than datives to impress him.

Eupti no longer felt any compulsion to encounter travelers on the Theban roads, since the original riddle had been solved, but she was willing to threaten Spyros or any of his lackeys. After all, this was her home, far more than it had ever been my family's. If a resort were built here she really would want to go back to killing people.

"That œdicephalic Spyros won't be here for hours," I told Eupti. She was puzzled by my calling him a swollen head, so I explained. "But we'll have to have a really good riddle for him when he does come."

"I only know the one," she said sadly. "The Muses gave it to me. Only one man ever answered it, but now it seems to be known to everyone."

"Œdipus would have been better off if he hadn't," I said. "He and his whole family had terrible things happen to them because he got past you. Sophocles wrote his greatest plays about them. But for now...Let's go indoors."

I opened the french doors and we went into the biggest and best-furnished room of the house. It has two stools, a chair, a work table, and BOOKS.

"One of your names is Lysainigmata; you must know many riddles," said Eupti.

"A great many," I said, "but Spyros has a British education and probably knows all the British and European, and most of the American, that I do. Like, how many fundamentalists does it take to change a light bulb?"

Light bulbs could be demonstrated, but fundamentalism takes some explaining. At last she said, "I think I see. How many?"

"Thirty-seven," I answered.

"Why that many?"

"Don't question it. Just believe." That one got to her, all right, but she never did understand "How many dadaists does it take to change a light bulb?" (The answer: "A fish.")

We were pretty well agreed that it wouldn't do to ask a riddle that he wouldn't accept — the dadaist one for

example — yet if it were a riddle with a known answer he might know it. Could we get away with Eskimo or Polynesian or Mayan riddles? I doubted it. He would say it wasn't a real riddle, or demand time to research the answer. No, it would have to come out of the Classical and European tradition; and it would have to be one he couldn't possibly answer... My eyes swung around the room. Homer, Hesiod, Herodotus — Plutarch, Plato — and a wealth of nineteenth-century British classics, Doyle, Haggard, Kipling, Carroll, Dickens, Scott, Meredith... My eyes stopped, swung back.

Spyros's silver-gray Mercedes came wallowing up the track the pickup had used, lurching in the ruts and bashing its transmission on the high center. It was mid-afternoon, full of hot hillside smells, stone and grass and the pungency of thyme. Grasshoppers buzzed in the quiet after Spyros banged the car door shut and started toward me.

"*Kalimera, kyria* Lysi," he said conventionally. Then, switching to English, "What the devil kind of hoax are you trying to pull up here? Theo tells me he's met the mythical Sphinx."

"Yes, she's here," I said. "She's going to fix this business up for me."

Euptianousa came out of the library, where she had been reading *Antigone*.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Nikolaides," she said. "Why is a raven like a writing-desk?"

Spyros lost his sphincters. He grovelled on hands and knees, wet, stinking and shivering, and wailed, "There is no answer! There is no answer! Please, Lysistrata — can't we fix this up between us? You can keep the house — I'll see there's a legal record of your mother's birth — I'll deed you the land — all the Theban land I own! Anything! What can I give you?"

"Besides what you've offered so far," I said, "you will endow in my uncle's memory the Dean W. Dickensheet Research Chair at a suitable university, with a lifetime tenure for me at a reasonable stipend, that will enable me to translate the Theban plays of Sophocles."

He didn't argue. So I handed him the slip of paper I had prepared, saying, "Tell her the answer."

He looked. "This doesn't make sense."

"Go ahead."

He read, "Neither begins with a B."

It's a pretty good stipend, at the Athens campus of the University of California. Which means I can travel, make friends, and go around in various academic and other circles, and spend as much time as I please in Great-grandfather's house with my very best friend of all, Euptianousa the Theban Fix.

And I'm working hard on the *Œdipus the King* right now. Spyros asked me why, since my great-grandfather had done it already, but that was a translation for his own generation. I'm doing one for mine. English doesn't stand still, and a new generation needs to hear Sophocles in its own language.

And the answer to the Mad Hatter's riddle, "Neither begins with a B"? It may not be the real answer, but it's *my* answer, and good enough for the occasion.

After all, I'd put in the fix.

❧

KAREN ANDERSON has been published in *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Fantastic*, and *Galaxy*, besides various fan publications. Her short work, including collaborations with husband Poul Anderson, has been reprinted in **THE UNICORN TRADE**. They also collaborated on **THE KING OF YS**, a four-volume historical fantasy set in the late Roman empire. Her interests include medieval cooking, filk singing, and space development.

NICK JAINSCHIGG lives in New York City with his wife Monica and a grey-cheeked parakeet. He recently won the Jack Gaughan Memorial Award for Best Emerging Artist. ("What I'm emerging *from* is not mentioned," he notes.)

Artwork by Nick Jainschigg

Artwork by Armand Cabrera

Butterfly

by A. W. Bates

The orange and black butterfly balanced along the swaying stalk of the purple iris. In the background, I could hear children yelling, the squeaking of the teeter-totters and the swings, but Corey only watched the butterfly, clearly fascinated as the tiny feet delicately negotiated the iris's trembling petals. Corey held out her pale, thin hand and the butterfly confidently walked across the bridge of her finger to her palm. Corey's blue eyes looked even bluer next to the orange of the butterfly, but her interest alarmed me. Standing under the nearby Loblolly Pine tree, that nosy photographer Garson — or at least his camera — alarmed me too. Knowing my words would disrupt the moment, I asked Corey, "Is that a Monarch or a Viceroy?"

"Oh Daddy! You scared him off." She glared at me for my clumsiness. "It was a Viceroy. Monarchs are bigger and they stink."

"Corey, people don't smell butterflies."

"I don't know why not. I do," Corey argued.

There was no use arguing back.

"I almost had it. What a shot! What a picture!" Garson stomped across the park.

"It doesn't matter, Garson. You might as well give it up," I told him. "I'd never sign a release."

"Why not, Doc? She's a natural." Garson shook his leonine head and replaced the cover on his Hasselblad. Garson was only twenty-one but he was already an acknowledged boy wonder in the world of fashion photography. For some reason — maybe he'd sensed her uniqueness or perhaps he was simply drawn to a pretty face — whatever the reason, he'd decided he wanted my daughter to model for him. I wasn't buying it. He had enough looks, charm, talent and money that he wasn't accustomed to taking no for an answer. But that's all he got from me.

"She's a natural," Garson insisted.

"Precisely," I told him.

"Huh? Doc, she'd make a fortune. She could be on the cover of any magazine she wanted: *Cosmopolitan, Seventeen, Sports Illustrated.* What do you want of me, Doc?"

"Garson, you're a world class pest."

"Come on, let her do it." He turned to Corey. "Don't you want to make millions of dollars? Don't you want to be a cover girl?"

"No." Corey looked him squarely in the eye. For all her slightness, she was as tall as he. "Don't you ever think about anything but taking pictures and making money?"

"What else is there?" Garson said.

"There's nature," Corey said.

Garson's eyebrows raised. He took a short step back, and looked Corey over from her size three Adidas to the flower barrette in her hair.

The conversation — and Garson — were starting to make me nervous.

"Are you hungry?" I picked up Corey's book-filled backpack, ignoring the photographer.

"Sure, Daddy."

"You pick the restaurant," I told her. We left Garson in the playground, but I could feel him watching.

"Do I really have a Mama, or did you adopt me?" Corey asked me across the cafeteria table.

"Of course you have a mother," I said, trying to be patient. Over the years we'd been through this a hundred times, but now that Corey was a teenager, she was harder to put off.

"Is she dead?"

"No, she's not."

"Are you divorced?"

"No. We were married by a Justice of the Peace in Arkansas. But after our honeymoon...she changed. There's no one...like your mother. There won't ever be anyone else."

Corey digested that. Her long, slim fingers toyed with her glass of juice. "Why isn't she with us? What's the big secret? Are you mad at her?"

"No. Eat your dinner, Corey."

"I'm stuffed."

She took the last sip from her tall glass of fruit nectar, but she'd hardly eaten a thing from the big bowl of salad I'd put in front of her. I shook my head at her to show her how displeased I was, but I wasn't surprised. Corey hardly ever ate more than a bite at a time. Of course, it wasn't surprising, considering.

"So why doesn't she live with us?"

I took a sip of my coffee, trying to think of how to answer that question.

"She doesn't like me, is that it? I'm too different."

I couldn't bring myself to lie to her, to tell Corey that she wasn't different, because she was. Corey's shimmering ethereal quality set her apart, even more so than her slight frame. Dr. Vlasco, Corey's pediatrician, had been trying for years to get me to have Corey tested at the children's hospital. But I knew there wasn't anything wrong with Corey. She just took after her mother. Sometimes I feared she would be so much like her that she'd have to leave too.

"Of course she likes you. She loves you. What brought this on?" At least I thought she loved our daughter, but it was hard to know for certain, since Corey's mother didn't speak English. She didn't speak any language — at least, none that I knew.

"I'm tired of going on field trips when everyone's mother comes but mine. When we went to the museum last week, all the mothers came, even Tommy Hughes's mother came, and his folks are divorced."

For a moment I regretted sending Corey to Pendleton Academy for Gifted Students because, between the class participation and the PTA, Pendleton demanded more than I, a single working parent, had time to offer. The dissatisfaction with Pendleton passed — like indigestion after Tums. There really hadn't been much choice in the matter. After all, Corey *was* exceptionally bright. She needed Pendleton. Furthermore, at a public institution, I wouldn't have the control I needed over her education. There was no avoiding the fact that she was more different than she — or anyone — knew.

As a psychologist-psychiatrist, I thought I'd prepared her to face life well. She was certainly more well-adjusted than the post-adolescents in my therapy sessions. Certainly I'd tried my best to help her adjust, but there's only so much a concerned father can do. Especially as I was working blind where Corey was concerned. There was no precedent to Corey that I knew of.

"This is really bothering you, isn't it?" It was bothering Corey's mother too. For the first time since she put Corey in my arms, she wanted to see Corey. I would concede the point. After sixteen years maybe it was time mother and daughter reunited. I cleared my throat, making a decision. "Do you want to meet your mother?"

"Oh, Daddy! Oh yes! Can I? Can I really?" Corey looked up at me, her fragile, fair skin glowing even in the grim light of the cafeteria. She reached out and touched my arm with her fingertip. I laid my hand flat and she placed her palm on mine. I was always careful with her. She was so fragile that she worried me sometimes — but there was nothing I could do about it. It's just the way she was.

"So when are we going to meet her? Mama." I could hear her trying out words. "Mommy. Oh, I'm too old to say that. Mother. Can we meet Mother now?"

I pulled Corey's chair back — it was too heavy for her to move — and we walked toward the cash register.

"Don't rush so, Baby. Let's aim for this weekend." I tried to steer Corey past the line of customers so they wouldn't jostle her, but I was thinking that this weekend there would be a full moon. Corey's mother and I had so little time together — only during the full moons of summer. That was our signal.

"Oh, Daddy, nothing would make me happier!"

"Did you see the *Rosa nutkana*? Isn't it beautiful? And look, two *Rosa setigera*," Corey said. She cupped the petals in her hands and sank her nose in the bunch of blooms sitting by the register.

"Git yer face outta my flowers, girl. Hey mister, get your kid to get outta my flowers. They ain't nothing special, just roses outta my back yard." The clerk was a slim, pretty blonde, but next to Corey she seemed stolid, weighty.

"Oh, but they are special," Corey said. The sour expression on the clerk's face aggravated me, but Corey was well-accustomed to this kind of reaction to her enthusiasm. "Excuse me," she said politely, "I was just admiring your roses. This one's a wild rose, and these are Prairie roses. Some people call them Michigan roses."

"I'm impressed. You sure know a lot about roses for such a little girl. How old are you? Thirteen?" The blonde seemed to measure Corey as she handed me my change.

"I'm sixteen," Corey said. Did I imagine it, or did she flush slightly?

I heard the clerk mutter under her breath, "Show off," and I was relieved to see that Corey had preceded me through the revolving door into the foyer.

As we walked to the car, thinking about the clerk's rudeness made me feel like I'd been the one to commit a transgression, like that embarrassed sympathy when you see someone's thoughtless or inadvertent rudeness to a handicapped person. I had a undoctorlike urge to slap that woman's face. I hated the way people always made a big deal about Corey's differences. She couldn't help it if she was frailer than other children, any more than she could help being smarter and prettier.

But Corey never mentioned it. She took it in stride, the same way she accepted her 187 I.Q., her biology teacher's admiration, or that photographer's interest.

People were always assuming she was younger — or a dancer — or one thing or another.

"So, Daddy, where are we going to see my mother? Do you have to call her or something? Don't you have to make plans?"

I smiled at her as I pulled onto the expressway, but I was a little worried she wouldn't understand.

"Corey," I said.

"Yes, Daddy?"

"I don't want your feelings hurt. Just take my word for it that, after this weekend, you'll understand what all the secrecy has been about. There are so many reasons why we, why your mother and I, did this. There are so many reasons we raised you this way."

"What reasons, Daddy?"

"I had to teach you..."

Corey looked at me blankly. "What are you getting at, Daddy? Teach me what?"

"How to live in society. How to function as a..."

"A what, Daddy? A Pendleton lady? A red-blooded American teenager?" she said with uncharacteristic sarcasm.

No, Corey, I thought, I had to teach you how to function as a human being. But what if you turn out not to be? But I couldn't tell her that. I settled for changing the subject.

"I just don't want your feelings to be hurt."

I could see she was confused, but she was trying to be grown up about this.

"What would hurt my feelings, Daddy?"

"I've been seeing your mother off and on, all these years."

"Oh." Corey looked at me steadily, trustingly. "Well, there must have been a good reason she hasn't lived with us. Is there something wrong with my mother?"

"No, she's wonderful. She's beautiful and sensitive. I love her enough that I've never married anyone else."

"Well, why hasn't she lived with us?" Corey persisted.

"She's just different. She has trouble living around other people." I glanced at Corey. "I have one other stop."

"So?"

She waited sullenly while warehouse workers filled the trailer with crates of honey and fruit juices. In fact, all the way home, Corey contemplated her hands folded in her lap.

As I pulled into the driveway, she said abruptly, "Is she different like I'm different, Daddy?"

I was glad we were home and that it was dark outside, because I didn't want Corey to see how my hands trembled at her words. I hadn't thought of the possibility in years, not since that second summer, when I first learned of Corey's existence. I could feel myself breaking out into a cold sweat and my collar felt too tight. I did my best to keep my voice even, my face expressionless.

"Is she different like you're different?" I said slowly, feeling my stomach tighten with dread and anxiety. At this rate I was going to get an ulcer. I wondered about the answer to that question myself. "I don't know."

We passed a hand-painted sign nailed to a tree.

"What did that say?"

"Fifteen miles to the Rainbow River Trout Resort," Corey told me. "Oh, I'm so excited. My mother is really coming?"

Artwork by Armand Cabrera

She swayed with the motion of the car, and leaned toward the window. "It's just beautiful out here. Look! There's some persimmon trees growing wild." Corey sniffed the air. "What's that?"

"What does it smell like?"

"I don't know. It smells...friendly. Kind of sweet. I don't know. I don't think I recognize ..." she sniffed again, "but it's familiar."

I'd thought I couldn't get more uneasy but I was wrong. I felt that familiar burning start in the pit of my stomach. I turned off the gravel road winding under the trees and parked.

"Daddy," Corey said, exasperated as usual, "the campground is thataway." She pointed.

"We're not going to the campground. These acres here are my land."

"Your land, Daddy? When did you get it?"

"Seventeen years ago."

"I didn't know that. Why didn't you ever bring me before? Why didn't you ever build a house?"

"I don't think your mother wants me to."

Corey looked at me unsteadily, but I could see she was confused.

"Does she live here?"

"Sometimes."

She was so excited to be here in the woods — too excited. I could see a too-rapid pulse flutter in her throat.

"We're hiking in. Go get your pack. I'll carry my duffel and the tent and come back for the rest of the supplies."

I opened the trunk and shrugged into my load while Corey found her own gear in the front seat.

Staggering under the light weight of her frameless nylon backpack, Corey rounded the car, but I knew better than to offer any help. It worried me lately how fiercely independent she was getting. She might be getting as independent as her mother. The acid in my stomach burned just a little more and I took a few antacids.

We set off down the trail, Corey exclaiming over each different species of lichen, each fern, each wild flower. She knew most of their names from her botany class. The deeper we went into the forest,

the more excited Corey became. I, on the other hand, was becoming extremely agitated. I couldn't help wondering if making this trip had been a mistake. I wanted to call it off because I realized — suddenly realized though I'd thought about it before — this was irreversible.

I should have waited. Years.

At the foot of the next hill, Corey knelt in the dirt to look at a big patch of clover. She eyed the bees. "I wonder if there's a bee tree near here."

"We've got twenty cases of honey in the trailer. You don't need to look for a bee tree *now*," I told her. "Stop over the next rise. That's where we'll make camp. You can start gathering firewood and putting it in the stone fire-ring up ahead. You'll recognize it when you see it." I yelled, "Not too much wood. A big fire is too dangerous." Corey was already out of sight, on the other side of the hill.

I looked around. I could feel her. Corey's mother. She was here already, waiting in the woods. More than my wife. She was my mate. Would she come out? Would she be afraid because I'd brought Corey with me? Would she recognize her daughter? She ought to, because I brought fat, Corey-laden photo albums with me every summer. Pictures of birthdays and holidays, school, camp, and home. I brought hundreds of pictures but there were never enough. Corey's mother would turn the pages and cry silently over the pictures. I'd feel the raw emotion of her pain, her loneliness, her isolation. Our last meeting was the worst of all. She clutched the album to her and entreated me with her eyes; she tried so hard to make me understand. All I could do was guess that she wanted to see Corey. Or that she needed to. But I might have been guessing the wrong thing. Without words, some things are hard to know.

But some things don't need words at all.

I could feel her out there, waiting. She'd come to me after dark.

"Corey, about your mother." I wondered how to tell her to lessen the shock, "She doesn't speak." *Among other things.*

"She doesn't?" Corey seemed more curious than upset. "Is she deaf or mute?"

"No. She just doesn't speak. I don't think she ever learned how."

I stood in the center of the clearing, in the red and orange light of the fire, and I tied a sheet around me like a toga. *See me,* I thought, looking into the shadows beyond the campfire. Corey of course, thought I was going insane. *Are you watching?* I wondered if *she* would know to put the sheet around her. Corey's mother flying naked into the clearing would be overwhelming, certainly too much of a shock for Corey to take in at one time.

"What *are* you doing, Daddy?" Corey started laughing. "You look silly."

"What are you laughing at, young lady?" I asked her, making a game out of wearing the sheet. I took her hands and started swinging her around the clearing. "Want to dance some more?" I asked her. Every time she caught her breath, I swung her around more, until she was dizzy and exhausted.

"That's enough!" she chortled, laughing and panting.

I stood in the clearing a few moments longer, then shook the sheet out and hung it on a tree limb a few yards into the black thicket of trees.

"What was that all about, Daddy?" she panted, "And why are you hanging that sheet on a tree?"

"Airing it out," I lied. It was a stupid explanation but she took my word for it, too tired to do anything else.

"Why didn't you ever bring me camping before, Daddy?"

"I was afraid to. There will be changes," I told her. "Things will be different now." I watched her struggle to keep her eyes open. The light from the low embers of the campfire danced over her almost translucent skin. My sweet daughter. I didn't want things to change, but a man can't alter nature, can he? Not without injury.

As I concentrated on laying the ground cloths and shaking out the sleeping bags in the two tents, I could feel Corey fluttering drowsily around the campsite. Eventually she lit on a huge log facing the fire. She was terrified her mother would reject her, or maybe that she wouldn't come at all; but she didn't want or need to voice her fears. I could read them in her eyes.

"She'll be here," I told Corey. "Why don't you go to sleep before you fall off that log? I'll wake you up."

"No. I want to wait for her," Corey said. And then her head tilted forward slowly and her eyes closed.

She was asleep. As I carried her into her tent and zipped her into the sleeping bag, I could feel someone behind me. She was here.

Lightly she crept into the tent, wrapped in the sheet. I watched her, Corey between us. I suppose my eyes were as hungry for the sight of her as hers were for our daughter.

She leaned over Corey. I could just make out her features in the attenuated light from the fire. Both my women had almost the same face: the high cheekbones, the sweet mouth, the wide lapis-blue eyes, the incredibly fair velvety skin. But with one difference. I could see the shiny reflection of tear trails along my wife's cheeks.

Corey opened her eyes sleepily. Her eyes took in the woman standing over her and flashed to me for confirmation. "My mother?"

I nodded.

"Mama?" she said and smiled. "You're real. You're really here!" Her mother smiled back. Their hands joined — narrow, light, tiny-boned hands both. This was their moment. I, heavy, ungainly human that I am, was an intrusion. I didn't belong with them, not now, maybe not ever. I backed out of the tent, unnoticed.

I don't know how long I waited by the fire before I went to my tent, knowing things would be different now. Just how different, I was afraid to contemplate. I had the greatest fear that I would lose them both, my child and my wife. It was while I lay in the dark that I realized Corey had only been loaned to me. She belonged here in these woods, a creature of flowers and sunshine and wind. I turned away from the unzipped door of my tent, feeling the aching in the base of my throat and a deep pain in my gut.

How long did I lie there in the dark, wondering if I would ever see them again? I don't know. At last I fell asleep.

I felt her touch, the light stroking of her velvet fingertips against the stubble of my beard, even before I opened my eyes. She straddled me, outside the sleeping bag, but her weight was as nothing.

That's when I opened my eyes. I could see her in the flickering light, still wearing the sheet. I hooked my finger in the corner and tugged until the sheet fluttered to the ground.

"You came to me," I said, choking on the knot in my throat. "I thought you would take her and go away." Her fingers touched the tracks of my tears. "I love you," I whispered. "I wish I could tell you. I wish I could know you understand."

I unzipped the sleeping bag and she slipped in, fitting lightly beside me. I collected the thick mane of her hair, pulling it over her shoulder, baring her back. I touched, tentatively, the tiny rolled coils of her wings, just below her shoulder blades.

She laughed, and crouched over me.

Artwork by Armand Cabrera

Her eyes twinkled at me, gamine that she was. She leaned over to kiss me. Shimmering pure color like stained glass windows with the sun shining through, her wings — like the finest, strongest, silken velvet, only alive with her passion — curled, embracing me to her.

Across the campfire, Corey sat beside her mother on a wide log. Corey was drinking a juice, and her mother was struggling with no success with a jar. I had just dragged a stump from the woods. Still huffing, I sat down.

"Do you want Daddy to unscrew that jar of honey?" Corey asked. Her mother made the motions of talking but there was no sound.

"Just hand me the jar. I'll open it. Don't talk to her," I said, more curt than I meant to be.

"What? Don't what!" Corey glared at me, more angry than I've ever seen her. "And why not? Why can't I talk to my mother if I want to?"

I was speechless for a moment, aghast at her insensitivity.

"Don't pretend, Corey. It's not...kind."

There was nothing but silence in the clearing.

"Why, Daddy." Corey stood up. Looking puzzled, she walked around the campfire. "You're crying. What is it I'm supposed to be pretending?" Her voice changed, trembling. "Why are you crying?

"I hate to see her move her mouth like that, imitating speech. Don't pretend to talk to her. Don't pretend she can talk to you. She is who she is. Leave it at that. Don't make fun of her or frustrate her. You should know better than that or I've failed as a parent."

Corey looked down at me, the shock leaving her face. Just the hint of a smile curled her lips. She looked over her shoulder at her mother, who smiled back.

I was appalled at the way Corey was making fun of her mother.

"Stop it," I told her. "Stop it or we are leaving."

She walked back to the log and sat by her mother.

She looked her mother in the eye. "Shall I tell him?"

"Corey," I said, "this isn't amusing."

I stood up. "I'm breaking up camp right now. I'm taking you back home and you're never coming back." I walked beside Corey, who was still smirking at me. Her mother's hand reached over and took mine.

"You don't understand, do you?" I said softly to my wife, ignoring Corey, who was trying not to giggle. I couldn't understand how that girl could behave so...inappropriately. Looking at her trusting eyes. I could feel my insides melting like ice cream on a hot day. I knelt so I could be closer to my wife, but couldn't keep my voice from breaking. She was everything bright and sweet and good. If only she could understand. "She's not worthy of you. She's a mocking little brat." I glared at our daughter. "Oh, she's not a bad girl. I just don't think she's ready. I didn't bring her here to make fun of you. I know you're lonely here, you must be. I thought that you and Corey needed each other, but apparently Corey's not the girl I thought she was."

"I can't go, Daddy. I'm going to change." Corey ducked her head, almost shyly glancing at the wings rolled flat against her mother's back, the colors hidden by the wrapped sheet. "One day I'll have a boyfriend. And then," she whispered, "and then I'll have wings too."

My wife started to move her lips.

"No!" I cried, pressing two fingers over her mouth, "It's not a game! You don't understand!"

Behind me Corey was babbling. I was on the verge of sending her back to the car when I realized what she was saying.

"No, Daddy, *you* don't understand. She told me. Mama told me."

Corey's mother caught my hands in hers — not that the lightness of her touch could restrain me, had I tried to move. Corey's mother was looking at me so earnestly. Then she looked at Corey oddly — sternly almost, not an expression I'd ever seen on her face before.

Corey took a deep breath.

"She can understand you. I know she can. I can hear her, Daddy."

"Enough," I said, standing up. "I've had enough of this." I started to pull

away, then something in both their faces stopped me.

"Really, Daddy! I can. I can hear her as well as I hear you. Her voice is pitched a little high — I didn't even know you couldn't hear her."

The woods seemed suddenly full of sound just then: birds tweeting, chipmunks and squirrels chattering, leaves and wild nuts falling to the ground as the wind picked up. Nothing sounded louder than the beating of my own heart.

Could it be possible?

I knelt and took her hands, looking at her, at her wealth of thick black hair, her pale, impossibly-white skin stretched over high cheekbones, her delicate nose, her lapis-blue eyes. If she could talk, she could give me her thoughts. It seemed too wonderful to be true.

"Can you? Can you understand me?"

She nodded.

I closed my eyes and breathed for a moment, and then I asked a question I've been wanting to ask for years.

"Do you want me to build a house here in the woods, so we can be together?"

"She says yes, Daddy."

I couldn't let go of her hands. "One more question for now," I whispered. "We can sort through everything later but for now, tell me...tell me your name."

Her lips moved. Corey's voice whispered it like a prayer on the wind. The word fell into my ears, echoing, and that bit of understanding was like a key to our future when the mysteries would be gone and our lives would no longer be half lives in the lonely dark, but full rich lives shared in the sunshine. Everything would be different now. And better.

And I whispered her name, my wife's name.

"Ariadne."

❧

Alison Bates has been published in *Woman's World, Byline Magazine, Writers on the River* and various newsletters and won first place in the 1991 Tupelo Gumtree Festival literary fiction competition. She also spends time editing, tutoring local college and high school students, and workshopping with the Magnolia State Writers.

Armand Cabrera is a self-taught artist and says, "I've been at it for a million years" — really twenty-some, since he was fifteen. He has been involved in sf and fantasy art since 1980. He worked for several years at Lucas Films on their Star Wars games and is currently doing backgrounds for computer games at Electronic Arts as a computer artist .

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Marion Zimmer Bradley Talks To Writers:
Happy Endings

One of the things I'm always having to emphasize — especially to young and artistic types who are trying to avoid the 'cliche happy ending' — is my preference for a happy or at least a POSITIVE ending. One of the things young writers (or at least beginners) should avoid is an unhappy or negative ending. If your hero(ine) meets a dreadful fate in the end, you waste all the time you've spent in building up sympathy for the main character.

This became obvious to me when I was still teaching in Texas. I had taken two young girls to a film of the life of the opera singer Grace Moore, who at the end of the film, in a tearful scene, gives up her lover to devote her life to her art. Since Ms Moore never married, but did, in fact, devote her life to her art, this ending was inevitable, but both teenagers dissolved in tears, insisting, "It ended all wrong"

This business of "it ended all wrong" is a touchy one. You don't want to be so predictable that the reader can see the end from the first page. On the other hand people should be able to see a bad end coming. Remember the end of the third STAR WARS movie? I saw it in a theatre with ten million teenagers, and when the evil Emperor took the dive into the mine shaft (or whatever it was) that ended his life, you never heard such an explosion of joy! People love seeing a villain get exactly what's coming to him.

But you have to be subtle. You don't want everybody seeing what's coming too far ahead. If it's obvious from the first line that hero is going to get — or lose — the girl, why should anyone bother reading it for the fiftieth time?

Of course, sometimes a story is so well written — or such fun to read — that you read it over and over again just because you want to. There's one trouble with this category: it's very subjective. Sometimes I have to reject a story I like very much because — even though I personally love it — its appeal is too limited. I once rejected a story by Susan Shwartz that I loved, because a reader would have needed to be (as both Susan I were) very knowledgeable about opera. I know from experience that most people aren't.

I have lost count of the times I've had to write on a rejection slip that "stories about writers are mostly of interest to other writers." They don't appeal nearly so much to the average reader. Of course, this magazine appeals more than most to would-be writers. Sometimes I get the feeling that everybody and his sister wants to write. Once when I was teaching, and talking about writing, I asked "How many of you would like to write? Every hand in the room went up — including those of some kids who read only with difficulty, and couldn't write anything resembling a literate sentence.

There's a big difference between wanting and getting. (Be careful what you pray for — you might get it.) A lot of people think they'd like to be writers, but they really don't want to work at it. More than half of the manuscripts I get are from one-timers who quit after their first rejection slip.

I wonder, if they can't stand the heat, what are they doing in the kitchen?

Writers Talk Back
Get Ready, Get Set...
by Parke Godwin

There are three rules for writing the novel.
Unfortunately, no one knows what they are.
—W. Somerset Maugham

As Mr. Maugham spoke sooth, I'll never be anyone's guru on the theory of the novel. Your book is its own unique set of problems and imperatives, though you've probably learned a great deal already from writers you admire, as I have. However, none of these examples told me how to get down to work and start my own book. Never mind finishing — *starting* the damned thing is an emotional Everest. Like rising from a warm bed on a cold morning, you have to fish or cut bait, risk your book becoming reality that may be criticized for results far short of your dream. You risk failure — there's that F-word again — from partial to abysmal. You're fighting all this resistance when you actually start. I'm always terrified at the beginning, but in the last few years, out of necessity, I've found a way to crack that ice, a nuts and bolts process that works for me. Try it on for size.

1. The book is boiling and seething within you. Good, let it. Avoid discussing it with *anyone* more than necessary, no matter how tempted. This is the cooking process, a delicate time. If you keep opening the oven, you lower the temperature. You talk away the need to communicate, which is your drive. I have to remind myself of this constantly: Godwin, possess thy muse in patience and shut *up*.

2. While the story is developing, put all your sketches into a

single folder, numbered and dated. Let sketch #1 be a brief, concise description of the story and intent from start to finish. En route much will change, but the sooner you're sure of story arc the better. Get it down on paper. "This is the story of — who they are, where they're going, what they want/need, what happens in conflict, and so what?" The "so what" is very important, the reason why your story is worth writing and reading. Following are two examples of early sketches for **LIMBO SEARCH** and **ROBIN AND THE KING**.

"**LIMBO SEARCH** is the story of five tragically expendable people on a space station. We are currently probing a mineral-rich planet called Beta Hydri IV, but the planet is suspected to be an outpost of 'somebody' out there. Recently a two-man crew in the vicinity heard alien voice radio traffic, but 'something' came out of jump and zapped them. Now the station intelligence chief has orders to send another listening mission..."

At this early point I'm not bothering with characters, just premise and plot stated as succinctly as possible, although naturally specific characters are in mind. **ROBIN AND THE KING** is the sequel to **SHERWOOD**, so the main characters were already set. I sent the following sketch #1 to my editor.

"X number of years after end of **SHERWOOD**. Robin is now a strong voice in the Forest Court at Papplewick. We begin with conflict and have a marvelous, charismatic historical character named Ranulf Flambard as heavy. At rise of curtain, he and Robin are going head to head in the court and Ranulf notes Robin as a possible troublemaker. Thru Ranulf, Robin sticks his neck out too far and is banished from England. This struggle culminates in Robin's death at the end, but not before he has seeded in England the idea of a charter of common rights."

Broad in outline but to the point. Sketch #2 should be more inclusive with more detailed descriptions of your characters and story as conceived to date. Don't try to hassle it all at once. Trust your instincts. If sketch #3 completely negates #2, let it. That's why the careful dating, because second thoughts are usually clearer than first. You'll be wrong before you're right. This is not incompetence, merely evolution, and each successive sketch should build on the one before.

4. At a certain point in these sketches, you'll know when it's time to start text. For me this is always the time when I'm sure further sketches are vitally necessary, but it's a copout. I'm scared and looking for excuses to avoid that terrifying Page One just a *little* longer. Don't. This is where you bet or back off, your moment of truth. I began text on **SHERWOOD** after sketch #6, quite timorously, the last thing old Cowardly Lion wanted to face. No way, José. Your gut instinct is telling you to begin at this point, that the sketches have served their purpose. From here on, I do blocking notes, like a director blocking specific movement onstage, numbered and dated as with the sketches.

5. Once you start, a subconscious process kicks in as you search for the voice and stride of the book. *Don't* read over your early pages as they're done, just tuck them in the folder and keep going. You'll be tentative in the early passages until voice and stride are found. If it's an historical, you may tend as I did in the early chapters of **SHERWOOD**, to lump *all* that beautiful research into the first pages, and lumpy is what I ended up with on the first pass, but once started the problems were not insoluble. By indirection we find direction out, as Polonius said.

6. The blocking notes for each chapter or sequence are an ongoing process for me until the book is finished. This happens, that happens, then something else happens, etc. Once the blocking is clear, I try to find a lead sentence or para to get the sequence launched with an interesting narrative hook, sketching indicative dialogue as it suggests itself. I tend to think in dialogue, but if narrative is best for you, do it that way. First I determine point of view in each scene: whose? Usually that character's that most naturally furthers the story. By this time the nonverbal story sense is working at max, so a wrong point of view will *feel* wrong. If the entire scene just won't visualize, your subconscious may be waving a red flag at you: WRONG CHOICE, DIPSTICK. RETHINK. But at least you have a clear course to follow, and revision, if it lacks the hot blood of first draft, is a lot easier because now you *see* the difference between intent and results on the page and can pull them closer together.

7. Research, insights and character descriptions should be kept in a separate notebook, dated and checked off as you incorporate them into text. Blocking notes should be concerned only with the progress and action of the story. Don't obscure that clean line with five pages of associated homework.

There it is, the step by step process of starting and continuity that works for me and avoids the crippling error (my early and worst!) of trying to hassle the whole mess at once. From arc and intent, fleshed out sketch by sketch, at a certain point going to text guided closely by blocking notes. Quite often my notes, all or in part, are ignored or superseded by better ideas. Again, get used to being wrong before you're right. Trust instinct before intellect every time; if there's a conflict, instinct is trying to tell you something: not that way, *this* way!

But...suddenly your worst nightmare becomes reality. Your perfectly gestated dreamchild is born deformed. Everything you planned is there, everything's right except it's all dead wrong and you can't see why or where. How can you fix what you can't even find?

By tracing an exact profile of what you have.

At this point art steps aside and craft takes over. It's almost impossible to be objective about a work in progress. The profile method makes it much easier. On a series of consecutively numbered 3 x 5 cards, I go through the trouble spots or section and, with no more than two or three short sentences on each card, outline exactly what's on the page. Not my gossamer intentions but precisely what I've got. Just tracing this skeleton will often show me what's wrong. Then I lay out the cards in sequence on a table, and what I see is the bare line of narration/action with all the warts, warps and bulges plain to the eye. *This* is repetitious, *that* is an intrusion: disrupting flow. *This* needs to come earlier or later — in short, all the glitches adding up to narrative problems, most of which imply their remedy once visible.

This mechanical method was gleaned from one of my all-time favorite books, Moss Hart's beautiful autobiography, **ACT ONE**. As a young playwright, Hart wrote his first smash hit with the veteran George S. Kaufman. Throughout the grueling months of writing and tryouts, the last half of the play resisted all their efforts to come right. Each night Kaufman would cut the pages to the bone, "cutting away the underbrush", finding what they had in order to find what was wrong or needed. I've always remembered the lesson. When you're wrong, go back to square one, bare bones and basics, to find the glitch. He wasn't too proud at all. With confidence, oddly enough, there seems to come a useful humility.

I ain't proud either, Babe. Along with fear of beginning a book — every book — I get nervous in airplanes as well and always wear my Saint Christopher medal. I'm not Catholic, but if it would help, I'd add a Star of David and the Crescent Moon of Islam. At thirty-five thousand feet or the beginning of a scary book, you need all the friends you can get. ❧

Artwork by Dameon Willich

Mad Sally

by Patricia Duffy Novak

Gabrielle sat by the window watching the storm, relieved to have arrived at the inn in time to avoid the worst of the weather. Outside the rain came down in torrents, a cold soaking rain. It made Gabrielle shiver even to imagine being caught in that rain.

The room was almost empty. Only Gabrielle and the innkeeper and one other person — an old ragged woman sitting alone by the fire. And it seemed to Gabrielle that the woman was watching her, studying her. An uncomfortable feeling. Probably nonsense, or too much imagination, but Gabrielle turned her chair so that her back was to the other woman.

"I was in the guard once myself, dearie."

Gabrielle spun around, startled. The woman had crossed the room so silently that Gabrielle had heard no warning sounds.

The woman rested her hands on Gabrielle's table and smiled crookedly, revealing broken and blackened teeth. "Yes, in the guards," she said. The old woman's arms shook as they supported her weight, and Gabrielle silently wagered that, if the woman's claim was true, she could divine the reason for the dismissal. A love of strong drink had ruined more than one career.

Gabrielle set down her empty tankard. "Oh?" Over the top of the ragged woman's bent head, Gabrielle could see the innkeeper at his counter vigorously shaking his head and motioning for her to send the other woman away. But Gabrielle was in the mood for company, no matter how unusual.

"Tell you what," Gabrielle said, "let me get us both some ale and then I'd be glad to hear your story." Rising, she felt the reassuring thud of her long knife against her thigh. The ragged woman seemed incapable of physically harming anyone, but Gabrielle didn't take chances.

"Very kind of you, dearie," said Gabrielle's new friend, settling herself at the table. "Good of you to buy an old captain a drink."

Gabrielle stopped in her tracks. Old captain? Not possible. No one with a drinking weakness could rise to that rank. The guard story had to be either an alcoholic delusion or a sly ruse to cadge drinks. Well, it didn't matter. Gabrielle was in the mood for a yarn, and the old woman's story might prove worth the price of the ale, even if there was not a drop of truth in the telling.

Gabrielle handed her tankard to the innkeeper and signaled that she needed a second mug for her new companion. The fellow, a round-faced, big-bodied man, ignored the empty cup. He leaned forward so that his mouth nearly tickled Gabrielle's ear. "That's Mad Sally at your table," he said. "She makes things up in her head. She wandered into town a few years ago. Seems she's got no home so we let her in here on cold nights. There's no harm in her if you go along with her nonsense. But she can get mighty angry if you don't. Wouldn't think it to look at her, but she's terribly strong."

"I see."

He filled the tankard and drew another for Sally. Gabrielle returned to the table. "Thank you, dearie," said Sally as Gabrielle set down the ale.

"My name is Gabrielle." There were only so many "dearies" she could stand.

Sally took a long sip, her dark eyes flickering over the rim of the tankard. "And where did you train, Gabrielle?"

Gabrielle hesitated. She had never been a good liar. She knew this failing would severely limit her rise in the guards, but she couldn't force untrue words out of her mouth. Although Gabrielle didn't want to tell this mad woman much about herself, there seemed little harm in the question. She answered truthfully.

"Ah, Longtown on the Lake," Sally repeated, nodding her head thoughtfully. "I was there once on a mission, but I trained in Carabeau." Her gaze shifted from Gabrielle's eyes to the table and back again.

Gabrielle could feel the color drain from her face. No one outside the guards was supposed to know that name. Assassins trained in Carabeau.

The woman chuckled. She took a long sip of the ale and belched loudly. Then her laughter died. "Why are you alone so far from a base? The guards always travel in teams."

Gabrielle looked at Mad Sally closely, wondering if the woman could possibly be a spy for Lord Westfallow, the queen's enemy. No, he couldn't possibly have known Gabrielle would stop at this inn. This morning she herself hadn't known where she would spend the night. She dismissed the old woman's question as curiosity, nothing more. But now she wished she had gone disguised from the start of her mission. There had seemed so little need. The queen had seemed almost nonchalant about the errand. Take the dagger to Rashtar and keep your mission secret. That was all.

Gabrielle shrugged. "Times change, old woman. My mission is my own business, none of yours."

Mad Sally's gaze seemed to bore through Gabrielle's skull. "I was sent on a secret mission once," she said. "Alone, without a partner. I was sent to assassinate one of the queen's pax-men. She had learned he was a traitor, she told me, conspiring with Westfallow. That was many years ago. The pax-man's name was Dunnabar. Do you remember him?"

Now it was Gabrielle's turn to stare, as liquid rage coursed through her blood. In her anger, she forgot the innkeeper's warning that she should go along with whatever fiction Sally wove. "You're saying you killed Lord Dunnabar? What nonsense! He died in a fall from his horse. And he was never called traitor by anyone." Gabrielle would have said more, but she remembered her oath. A guard has no family, no personal honor, no right to demand blood price. A guard is a servant of the queen, nothing more.

Cold fire flashed in Sally's eyes, and Gabrielle reached for her knife. But then the fire in Sally's eyes banked, and she grinned slyly. "Aye. Nor do I call him a traitor now. I killed an innocent man."

Sally picked up the mug and drank deeply. Gabrielle sat transfixed, waiting to hear the rest, although her better judgment told her to leave immediately. Sally smacked her lips, then continued. "The queen wanted no witnesses. When I had done her bidding, she invited me to a private audience and gave me a cup of wine. A golden wine, smelling of flowers, sweet on the tongue. But I drank sparingly in those days and didn't finish the cup. Not wanting to offend the queen, I disposed of the rest of the wine by pouring it from the window while her back was to me. Had I not done so, I would have died. I am sure of it."

Gabrielle said nothing, and after another moment Sally continued. "I don't remember much of what happened immediately after I drank that wine. I must have been unconscious for a while. I awoke on a dung heap outside the village, dressed only in a coarse sack. My sword was gone. So was my knife. The queen must have believed me dead. But although I did not die, the poison didn't leave me untouched." She held out a hand, and her fingers twitched in a macabre dance.

Gabrielle tore her gaze from Sally's hand and stared at her eyes, surprisingly clear in the dirty, wrinkled face. Not at all the eyes of a crazed drunk. "Why do you tell me this story, old woman? If what

you say is true, I could report you to the queen, and she would see that you were well and truly killed this time."

The old woman laughed. "Would that be safe, dearie? If my story is true, wouldn't the queen kill you for having heard it?" She clapped her hands, as if dismissing the threat. "Bah. I have little faith that you believe me. But I tell you what I know in the way of warning. Don't trust the queen."

Gabrielle pushed her chair away from the table. To listen to such talk was treason. Moreover, she didn't trust her own reaction if Sally chose to speak again of Dunnabar. "Good night," Gabrielle said tersely. "Thank you for your company and for your story, but now I must get some sleep." She stalked away from the table towards the private room she had engaged for the night.

As Gabrielle lay on the hard mattress, she tried to dismiss the woman's words as the crazed rantings of an aging alcoholic. But her thoughts kept returning to a funeral she had attended when she was a child of nine. A dark-haired man in a coffin, face composed as if in sleep, large hands folded across his powerful chest. His eyes had been closed, the grey-gold cat eyes so like her own.

Her name had been Eleanor then, not Gabrielle of the guards. Mad Sally couldn't possibly have divined Gabrielle's true name and origin. It was only cruel coincidence that led the old woman to tell that wild tale. To join the guards, the cadets gave up old names and old lives to be born again in the queen's service. Gabrielle had not seen any of her family in over a dozen years, not since the summer she turned thirteen. Her own mother might pass her on the street and fail to recognize her. No, Mad Sally could not know Gabrielle's forsaken family name. Only the queen knew that Dunnabar had been her father.

Gabrielle rose before sunrise and donned a pair of fawn-colored breeches and a grey-green cloak rather than the scarlet and gold uniform of her regiment. She pulled her hair into a plait, the kind a wandering trader might affect, and covered her head with a travel-stained cap. A good disguise. And she would leave the inn unobserved, so that none could say a guard had taken the path into the Silverwing mountains.

She reached a hand in her pack and touched the small silk-wrapped package at the bottom. Even through the silk, she could feel the power of the object within. She should leave the thing alone, but she couldn't stop herself from touching it. She'd been drawn to the silk-wrapped dagger from the moment the High Priestess of Orix-Tar had first placed it in her hands.

Touch it. Touch it. A voice spoke in her head. Hardly aware of what she was doing, Gabrielle pulled the bundle from the pack and held it gently in both hands.

Unwrap the silk.

No! She fought the compulsion. The silk-wrapped dagger was elf-made, a magic blade. Death would claim anyone who touched it without protection. She could not touch the naked dagger and live — or so she had been told by the Priestess who gave it to her.

Unwrap the silk. This morning, the compulsion was too strong for Gabrielle's will. Her hand moved of its own accord, pulling the gauzy fabric from the blade.

No! She jerked her hand back before her fingers could grasp the jeweled handle.

Touch it. It's yours now. Yours.

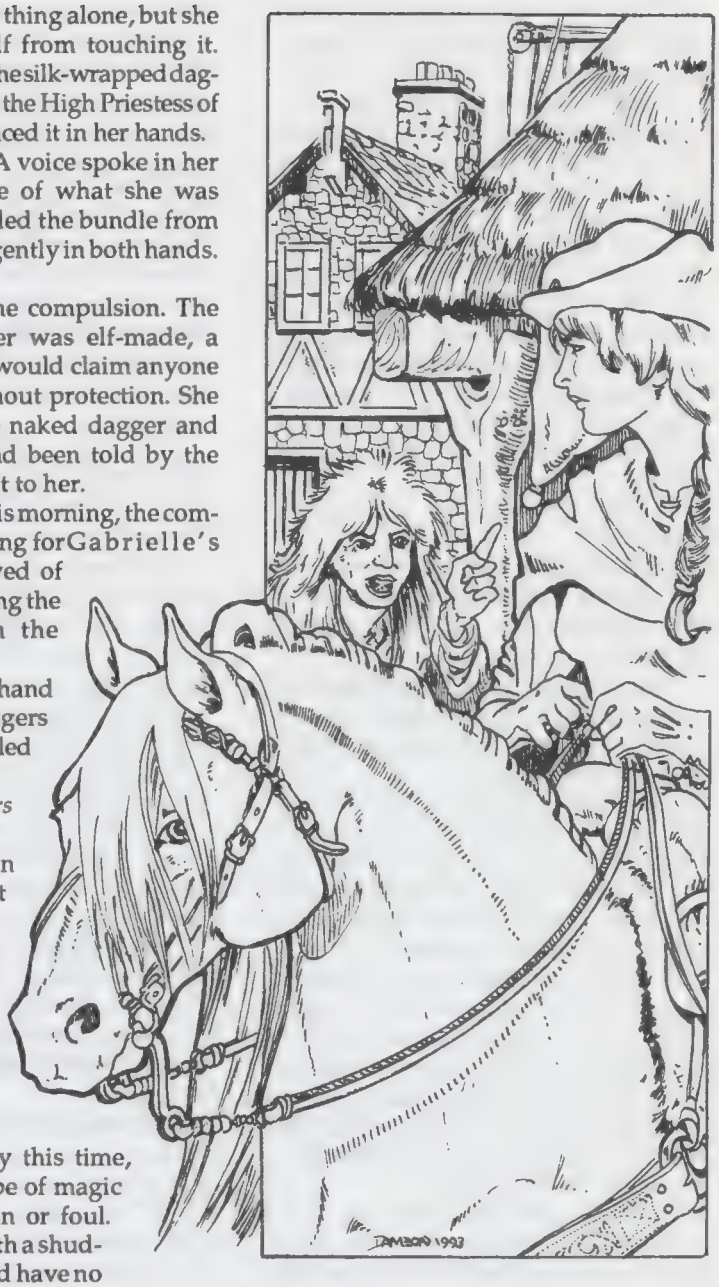
Whose voice was in her head? Surely not her own.

Touch the blade. Unable to stop herself, she ran a finger along the rune-carved blade. And lived.

She touched it again, with curiosity this time, wondering what type of magic the blade held, clean or foul. Foul, she thought with a shudder, or Rashtar would have no use for it. And that realization disgusted her, that a thing of evil should claim her for its own. She rewrapped the dagger, fighting the terrible urge to hold it, and dropped it back into her pack.

In spite of the evening's rain, the new day promised to be fair and mild. Gabrielle slipped quietly from the inn, calling no attention to her passage. The innkeeper and his helpers were still abed, and Gabrielle was congratulating herself on getting away unseen when a voice stopped her short.

"So, you're heading into the mountains, are you?" Gabrielle's eyes turned in the direction of the voice, and there was Mad Sally, curled in the stable doorway.



Artwork by Dameon Willich

Was the woman fey? Gabrielle tried to keep her face impassive, to hide her reaction, but she was no better at that than at lying. When Gabrielle said nothing, Sally smiled widely and nodded. "I thought as much when I saw you sitting alone last night. What other mission could there be for a solitary guard? She's sending you to Rashtar, isn't she?"

Gabrielle's fingers itched to lock themselves around Mad Sally's scrawny throat. Last night, the wild tale of murdering her father. Now, a threat to the secrecy of her mission.

Gabrielle cursed herself for coming to this inn in the first place and speaking to Mad Sally in the second. But done was done. There was no going back.

Gabrielle bent down to speak and put

her face so close to Sally's she didn't doubt the other woman felt a spray of spittle. "Mind your tongue, old woman. Or I'll take it from you."

"You couldn't," said Sally flatly. "Even now, I'm more than a match for you." She stretched to her full height, and Gabrielle glimpsed for a moment something of the woman she must have been. It was clear that Sally was not as old as Gabrielle had first thought, being nearer to fifty than seventy.

Gabrielle put her hand on her knife, but as she locked eyes with the other and saw in their depths the absence of all hope, her anger died. She backed away from Sally. "I will not fight you. There is no honor in it." She cinched the girth around the gelding and put the bit in his mouth. All the while she felt Sally's silent gaze upon her back.

As Gabrielle readied to leave, she felt a hand upon her forearm, a tentative, feathery touch. "I have only one more thing to say, a piece of advice. Take no wine from Rashtar. Your guard oath protects you from the worst of a sorcerer's spells, but poison will kill you as surely as it would have killed me."

Gabrielle shook free of Sally's grasp and mounted. As she ducked through the stable doorway she turned back and looked at the old woman. "And I have advice for you. Do not smear the memory of the dead, or you'll number among them sooner than you had planned."

The trail to Rashtar's domain wound up the mountainside. It was hard going, and often Gabrielle had to lead the horse over the more difficult passages. By nightfall, she was exhausted, but as she lay on a grassy embankment, curled under a rough blanket, she couldn't keep her mind from racing along wild and dangerous paths.

Her father had been a horseman of the highest mark. He should never have fallen from that roan, a gentle beast that she herself, a child of nine, had been able to handle. But why kill her father? He had no enemies that she knew of. He was well-liked by both his peers and his underlings. Why would the queen want him dead? Gabrielle would never believe he had been disloyal.

Then she remembered other deaths, other lords who had died in accidents at the height of their careers. Argevale. Curmazon. Lady Tharra. This last only a year before. These lords, too, had been popular with the people. Did the queen guard her power so jealously?

No! Such thoughts were treason and madness. Gabrielle threw off the blanket and jumped up, filling her lungs with shuddering gasps of the cool mountain air. Above, the moonless sky was filled with iridescent stars. She gazed at the heavens, remembering what she was, a warrior sworn to uphold the queen's rule. The queen was her liege, the holder of her oath.

Gabrielle returned to her grassy bed, forbidding herself to give any more thought to a mad woman's raving. But sleep was a long time in coming, and what dreams she had were full of vague menace, of skeletal faces shimmering in mists, of bony hands reaching for her throat.

The next day's journey was even harder than the last. Truly, she didn't know why she bothered with the horse. She should have left him at the inn, as he was turning out to be an impediment rather than an aid in her scramble up those paths. All the while, as she traveled, inching her way forward, she felt the presence of dark magic, of hidden, nonhuman eyes.

While it was true that the guards were shielded from these, the lesser evils, still the flesh at the back of her neck prickled uneasily as she felt their malice. And what of Rashtar himself? His magic was surely strong enough to pierce her defenses, to weaken her, even if it couldn't kill her outright. But she carried the queen's token. Even Rashtar should honor that.

As the sun dropped low in the afternoon sky, she came at last to Rashtar's keep, a tall stone tower cleaved into the very side of the mountain. Grey and black it was, dark stone with darker shadows. She tethered her horse and pushed into the shadows at the base of the keep.

No wind stirred. No bird flew. Death's disciple reigned here, and the Dread God himself spread lifeless fingers to protect his own. She wanted to turn and run. But the queen had sent her with a message to Rashtar, and she would deliver it even though every instinct she possessed bade her flee.

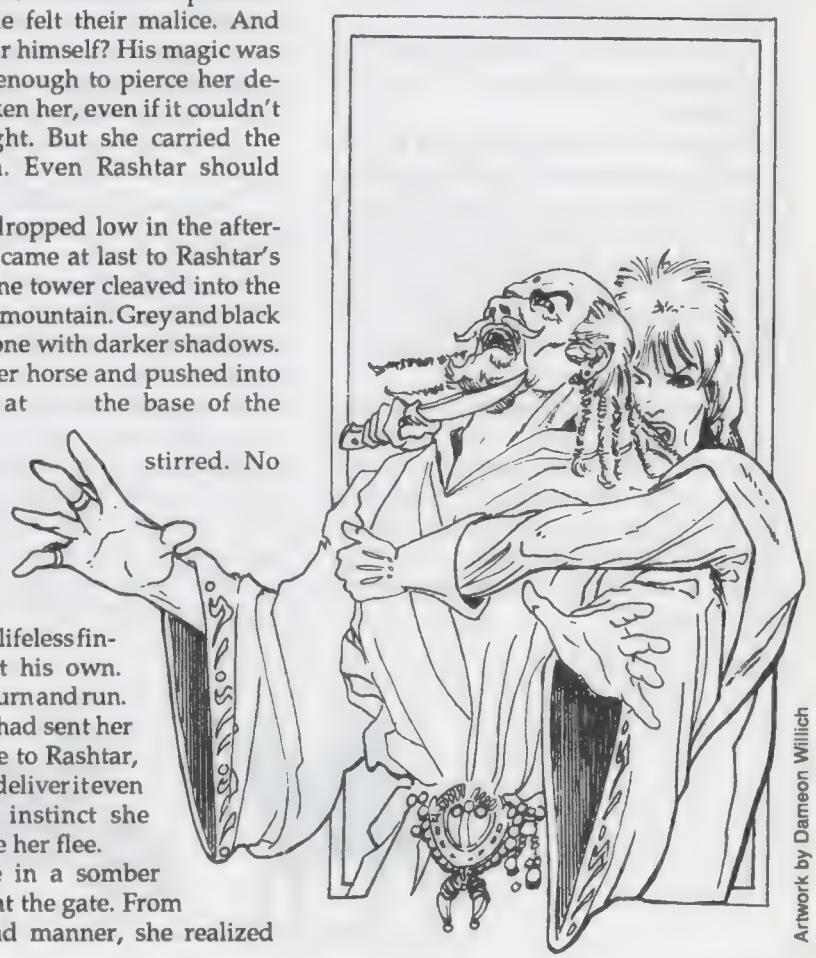
A tall mage in a somber cloak met her at the gate. From his bearing and manner, she realized that this was Rashtar himself. He seemed to have no servants in his keep, and if he kept disciples, she saw no sign of them. He smiled as he greeted her, a vaguely feral grin, but his eyes remained cold and appraising. "Good day, lady warrior. I hope your ride was not unpleasant."

Gabrielle had no desire to engage in idle conversation. "My queen bids me tell you that she would meet with you at Ramsen's Forge on the night of the full moon. She sends you this as token." From her pack, she pulled the silk-wrapped dagger.

Rashtar took the dagger from her, holding it on the flat of his hand, balancing it with care, and bade her follow him inside the tower, into a large room that was dimly lit by mage candles. He set the dagger on a heavy wooden table, next to a bottle and cups. With a wooden wand, he pried apart the silk wrappings and stood for a moment studying the naked blade.

"Excellent," he said. He smiled at Gabrielle again, although she wished that he would not. The gleam of his teeth in the green light of the room reminded her of the skeletal faces in her dream.

"Come," he said. "You have traveled



Artwork by Dameon Willich

far. Let me offer you refreshment for your journey home." He picked up the bottle and poured a heavy draught into one of the glasses. He handed her the drink, and she sniffed it. Wine. Golden wine with a floral smell.

She hesitated, Mad Sally's words echoing in her thoughts. *Take no wine from Rashtar.* She held the cup toward him. "Thank you, but I do not care to drink."

The smile widened, flattened, turned to a grimace. "But I insist." He raised a hand, twisted his pale fingers in the air, and Gabrielle felt as if something clawed at her throat. The pressure tightened, then held firm. So much and no more. Her defenses held back the worst of his blow. She choked, gasping for air. "Drink the wine," he said.

She tried to flee, but her feet were riveted to the floor. She held the cup to her lips, pretending to drink, all the while eyeing the dagger on the table beside her. Rashtar was a necromancer, but she would wager her soul that there was enough magic in that rune-covered blade to dispatch him fully to the nether world he already half embraced. He had left it there within her reach, no doubt believing what the Priestess had said, that no mortal could touch that blade and live.

Use me. Set me free.

Gabrielle cleared her throat. "An unusual vintage. I wish you would share in its delight."

He nodded, relaxing his hold on her, now that he believed her to be cooperating. The moment she felt some life return to her limbs, she hurled the cup at his head. As he ducked, his control faltered and she was released from his spell. She grabbed the dagger, rushed toward him, and pinned him in her arms. The silver blade glinted against his throat.

He didn't struggle as she dragged him back toward the table. "Drink," she commanded, pushing him towards the bottle. He looked at the blade, at the symbols of magic which now glowed with silver fire, and then at the bottle. He chose the latter, downing the wine in great shuddering gulps.

The poison acted quickly. In a matter of minutes, Rashtar lay dead on the floor of his keep.

Gabrielle struggled down the mountain, down the crooked path, and onto the roadway that led through the village. She had not stopped for the night this time, and when she emerged onto that roadway, she knew she looked a sight. Bedraggled, tattered, hollow-eyed and weary. No one would have believed her a guard. And, indeed, she no longer counted herself in their number.

As she rode past the inn, she searched the doorways and the alleys for a woman even more ragged than herself. She found her in the stable yard and rode towards her. A few feet from the old woman, Gabrielle reined in her horse and pulled the silver dagger from a sheath in her boot. "Do you know what this is?"

Sally squinted at the blade, and then her eyes widened in wonder. "An elf blade. Where did you get that dagger, child?"

"From the High Priestess of Orix-Tar."

"Elira's dagger then. It must be, else no human could wield it. And the blade has chosen you."

Gabrielle nodded, relieved at the old woman's words. Everyone knew the legend of Elira Starbrow, Saint and Martyr. The blade was not a thing of evil after all. Gabrielle dropped it back into her boot. For better or worse, it was hers now.

"And your mission, child," Sally said. "Did you find Rashtar?"

"He's dead," Gabrielle said. "Poisoned by wine. A golden wine he would have given me to drink."

Sally's eyes gleamed in understanding.

"The queen bade me give Elira's dagger to Rashtar," Gabrielle said. "Can you tell me why?"

Sally paused, a thoughtful look in her eyes, then said, "I can't be certain. But Rashtar was a necromancer. With a token of power, perhaps he could have summoned the spirit of Saint Elira, compelled it to do his bidding." The old woman shook her head. "A bad business. The queen is evil."

"I know that now."

"And what will you do, now that you have become so wise?"

Gabrielle shrugged. "Perhaps I'll offer my services to Lord Westfallow. Or perhaps I'll cross the seas in search of a better place." A dozen days remained until the queen's planned assignation with the now-dead necromancer. Ample time for Gabrielle to escape.

Sally sighed. "You're young. You'll make a new life for yourself."

Gabrielle looked down at the woman who had once been an assassin, no longer doubting a word of her story. Mad Sally had taken Gabrielle's father's life, but her words of warning had saved Gabrielle's own. She couldn't leave her in the dust and dirt of the stable yard. Fate had placed this woman in Gabrielle's path, and Gabrielle was not one to turn her back on destiny. "Care to come along?"

"Thank you, Eleanor Dunnabar," Sally said. "I believe I will."

Gabrielle gasped. "How did you know my name?"

"You have your father's eyes. And I saw you once, when you were a child, sitting on your father's knee. There are some things an assassin never forgets: the eyes of an innocent, unjustly murdered. The eyes of the murdered man's child."

"And yet, knowing who I was, you told me of my father's murder?"

"To save your life, girl," she said. "To save your life. Now I have paid my debt."

Gabrielle had no more arguments to offer. She freed her foot from the stirrup and offered a hand. "Coming up?"

Sally grinned and swung up behind Gabrielle. Together they rode from the town, heading for the borders of the realm as fast as the horse could carry them.

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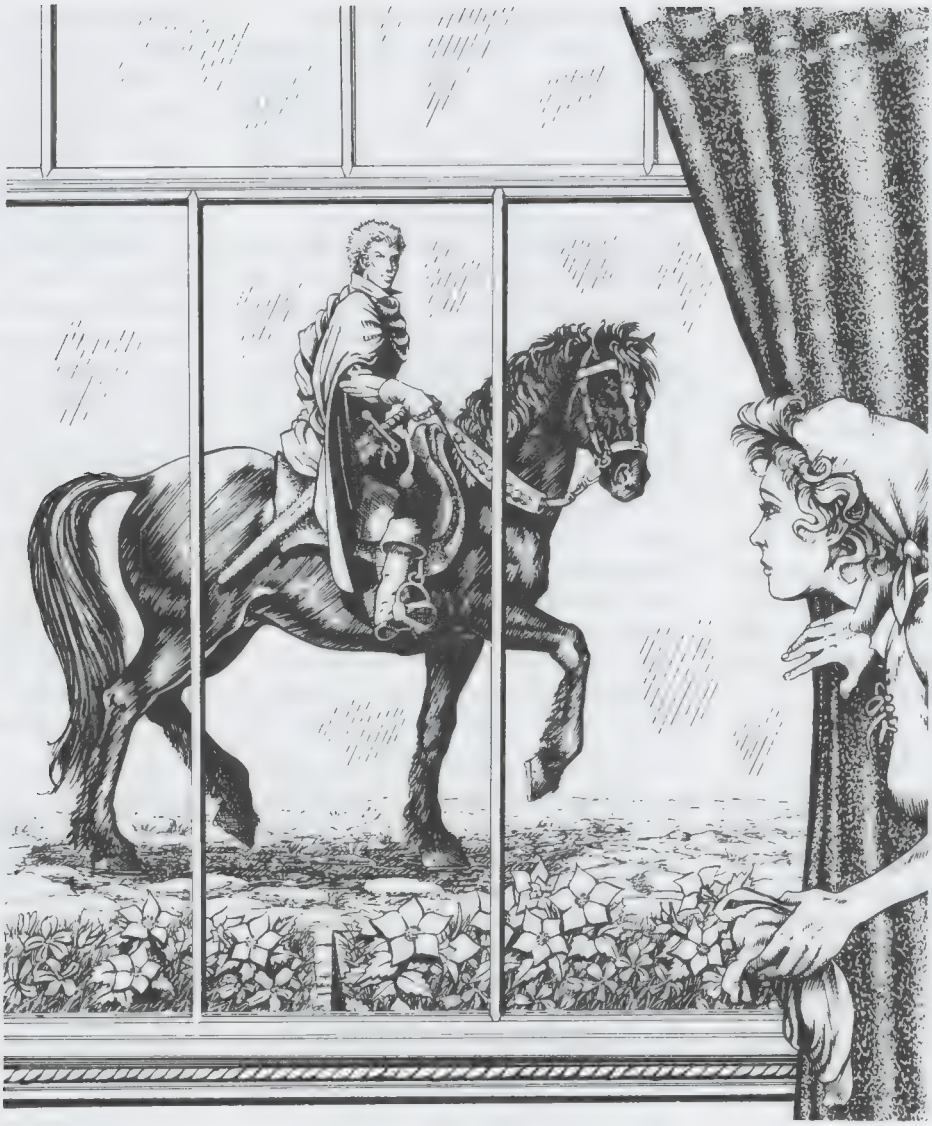


Artwork by Barb Armata

The Maid of Lyn

by Sharon Bailly

Two ogres besieged the city of Lyn and turned to stone everyone who left it. If a man, woman, or child wandered out of the city gate, they pounded each other on the back with glee because they saw another stone statue walking straight into their hands. But their watch being constant in one direction, it was very haphazard in the other. Travelers to Lyn slipped by the ogres, unaware of the risk they took. Then, the ogres snapped their fingers in frustration to discover that a perfectly good potential statue had crossed into Lyn uncaught.

But over the years, fewer and fewer people arrived and no one left at all. "As long as we stay away from ogres," said the people of Lyn, "they stay away from us. This is common sense." The people of Lyn prided themselves on common sense. True, it was inconvenient never to leave the city; but it was a lot more inconvenient to be turned into stone.

A hundred years passed (or maybe two), and a little girl knocked on the gate. She was dressed in rich clothes under a fur cloak much too large for her. The hem of the cloak scored the ground, marking a path directly back to the ogres and the mountains they lived in.

The people of Lyn assumed that the girl's parents had been turned to stone. The girl had escaped; but the people of Lyn were not especially happy to have her, hungry and weepy, roaming their streets and reminding them of ogres. At last the mayor volunteered to house her, if she would serve as his maid — once she grew tall enough to dust the tabletops. The people called her the Maid of Lyn.

The Maid worked hard and lived poor, since all her work as a child scarcely paid for her keep. The mayor calculated the difference, with interest, to be redeemed by her adult labors. She slept under the fur cloak she had worn down from the mountains. When her rich clothes shredded, the mayor sold her the castoffs of his cook.

The Maid heard how the ogres must have turned her parents to stone. She

greatly feared that the ogres were waiting until she grew up to snatch her and complete their set of statues. Therefore, she kept within doors, out of sight of the mountains, grateful for the excuse of work; she carried herself cautiously, in the hope that simple gestures would not be seen; and she spoke seldom so as not to be heard.

Sometimes she wished that her parents would escape the stone that trapped them, and rescue her. She sent them her thoughts on what to do: Make yourselves small as a child and sneak away. But evidently they could not make themselves that small and that sly.

The people of Lyn joked that the Maid spent so much time worrying about ogres, she might as well have been one. The children taunted her, "Ogre, ogre, ugly little ogre, ugliest ogre that ever was born." The Maid wished so hard for the death of the ogres that she feared they would hear her thoughts.

Twelve years passed and another visitor entered the city gate: a fat, pointy-nosed man, dressed in more colors than leaves show in autumn, on a brown pony and carrying a golden horn. When he reached the center of the city, he stopped his pony, aimed his prominent nose toward the mayor's prominent house, billowed his cheeks, and blew on the horn one loud and perfect note. The people gathered to see the man who made such a pleasant noise. The Maid peeked from behind the mayor's curtains lest the noise attract the ogres.

"Hear ye, hear ye," called the trumpeter. "Tonight Prince Michael comes to Lyn. He seeks an adventure that will prove him worthy of his father's throne and win him a princess."

The mayor said, "If the Prince wants an adventure, Lyn is the right place. Ogres watch us and turn to stone everyone who leaves. Maybe you should warn him to stay away."

The trumpeter considered. "Now if I went to warn the Prince, I would have to leave Lyn, and the ogres turn to stone everyone who leaves." He shook his head. "Prince Michael told me to wait here, and the Royal Trumpeter must always do exactly what his Royal Prince says."

Given such a strong demonstration of common sense, the people of Lyn liked the Trumpeter immediately. The mayor invited him to lunch. The Trumpeter soon learned everything about everyone, and when the Maid served the meal, he said, "She isn't the ugliest but she is certainly the quietest ogre I have ever seen."

Just before sundown, Prince Michael rode into the city on a coal black horse that lifted each foot high and placed it gingerly as if orchids and pearls were strewn beneath it. With only one rein, Prince Michael ordered his steed; the rein was studded with diamonds.

As the people of Lyn hesitated on the walkways, leery of his horse's power, the Prince noticed in the window of the largest house a young girl who wiped clear glass that already sparkled. The Trumpeter, however, coughed for his attention and introduced the mayor, who explained about ogres and mountains and common sense and invitations to dinner.

"If these ogres are turning people to stone," said the Prince, "I will stop them. Tomorrow morning, I will pursue the ogres and kill them both. Then I will ascend my throne and marry."

The people raised their eyebrows.

In the midst of this complete absence of cheers, the Trumpeter blew one more perfect note on his golden horn.

At her window, the Maid became impatient for dinner when she would serve the Prince, yet she wished the morning would never arrive when he would ride away. The Prince was very handsome and he felt exactly as she did: ogres ought to die. Now she wished with all her strength that her mother and father would break through the stone that kept them. She wished they would kill the ogres to save the Prince.

Before dinner, the Trumpeter told the Prince everything about everybody in Lyn. Thus, when the Maid served dinner that night, the Trumpeter announced, "And here, Prince Michael, is an ogre to practice your skills upon."

"No, indeed," said the Prince. "This is no ogre but a pretty and obliging Maid. I understand, young Maid, that you too braved a trip through the mountains."

No one before had suggested that the Maid's escape involved more than bare luck.

"I gave her a home when she first appeared in Lyn," said the mayor, "and she has served me ever since in gratitude."

"And hunger," added the Trumpeter.

"Of course," said the mayor.

"Well, since the Maid and I are equals in having passed through the mountains," said the Prince, "I would like her to join us at dinner and, if she would, tell me all she remembers about the ogres, that I may be better prepared to meet them."

The Maid did not know what to say. She glanced quickly at the mayor, but he was startled at the idea of a maid sitting down with a prince. His mouth hung open and would not close to say yes or no. The Maid turned to the Trumpeter, but his mouth was filled with food, and he motioned that he certainly could not speak until he swallowed.

The Prince told the Trumpeter, "Please relieve the Maid of her dishes and find a place for her at the table." The Trumpeter obeyed and offered the Maid his own chair. Then the Prince asked many questions about the mountains and the ogres. The Maid was too frightened to answer; how could she chance offending the ogres or, worse yet, misleading the Prince? Soon the Maid's silence spread along the table like wine spilling from a glass, dampening (as it were) every other conversation.

"I think," said the Trumpeter to the Prince, "that the ogres did indeed turn this girl to stone but you are the first to discover the fact."

The Prince laughed and gave up his questions.

The next morning, Prince Michael mounted his coal black horse and set forth to hunt ogres. The Trumpeter blew his one perfect note by way of farewell.

When she saw the Trumpeter return to the mayor's house for breakfast, the Maid ventured a question. "Aren't you going, too?"

"No," said the Trumpeter. "The Prince promised he would slay ogres. He never said I would."

"But isn't he your friend?"

"And therefore it eases his mind to know I am safe. Besides, I have other plans for my life than to be turned into stone."

"You won't help him?"

"No, but I will mourn him. Then I'll wait here for the next Prince who wants adventure." And the Trumpeter began his breakfast.

All morning the people of Lyn gathered to await the Prince's return. They recalled how handsome and brave he looked when he left. They praised the strength of a Prince who could control such a spirited horse with one rein. They marveled at the golden horn that announced his arrival and departure. They wondered how he would choose a bride, whether by glass slipper or magic kiss.

While she worked, the Maid silently exhorted her parents to awaken and help Prince Michael kill the ogres. Once, quite by accident, in the single-mindedness of her wish, her gaze swept up to the moun-

tain. She gasped and waited to be turned to stone. Nothing happened. *Perhaps,* she thought, *my mother and father have already killed the ogres. Maybe they killed them the day I escaped and have been wandering the hills searching for me ever since. Maybe they will meet the Prince and he'll bring them here.*

The possibility gladdened her. She even studied the mountains with all the concentration she had hitherto devoted to fending off ogres and moving her inert parents, but the Prince and her parents failed to appear.

By lunchtime the people spoke of food as often as they spoke of the Prince. They wondered if he had found the ogres and been turned to stone.

The Maid, who still debated glass slippers versus magic kisses, closed her eyes and whispered into the dark, "Protect the Prince. Protect the Prince." If she could have, she would have killed the ogres with a word and brought the Prince safely back. But she lacked the word.

By evening people began to shake their heads. "He should have stayed here," they said. "No common sense."

The Maid sought the Trumpeter. She found him in the kitchen eating an after-supper snack. "What will you do now?" she asked in her soft voice so seldom used.

"The Prince is strong," he replied as he brushed the last crumbs of a raspberry tart off the table and into his hand. "Give him more time."

"But what do you think will happen?"

"He'll kill the ogres, or be turned to stone," said the man, "one or the other. That's what princes do. What ogres do is to turn them to stone. And what servant girls do," he grinned at her, "is worry over them."

The Maid blushed. She turned her back on the Trumpeter. That night she made up her mind. She would go meet the Prince and her parents. They would reward her faith with magic kisses. She pulled her fur cloak around her shoulders and headed toward the mountains.

Although the stars shone brightly, the rocks and trees of the foothills cast shadows that confused her. Hillocks and brambles seemed to force her downhill, however she tried to climb up. By and by she stumbled against a sapling, disturbing a large brown bird that rested in its branches. "Help! Help!" screamed the bird. The raucous call identified it as a peahen. "Help! Help!"

"I'm sorry," whispered the Maid with her hand out to steady the tree. "I won't hurt you."

"What are you doing here?"

"Looking for Prince Michael. He came to kill the ogres."

"Where did you get that cloak?"

"My parents gave it to me."

"I saw that cloak years ago. I helped a King and Queen find their way through the woods. It was the King's birthday and they had sneaked away from his retainers with their baby daughter to celebrate with a picnic, like everyday folk. But they lost their way. They thought the woods romantic and decided to spend the night. They covered their daughter with the cloak to keep her warm and found their own warmth in each other. I warned them about the ogres but the King explained that the cloak was magic. On one day a year, it gave the wearer great strength. That day was the wearer's birthday; therefore, the King had no fear. He would grab the cloak and kill the ogres. Unfortunately, the ogres turned him and his wife to stone before he reached the cloak. But it hid the child and the ogres missed her. When she woke, I led her to Lyn."

"A King and a Queen?"

The peahen bowed her head. "And if you are their daughter, a Princess."

"The cloak is magic?"

"On your birthday it will give you invincible strength."

Artwork by Barb Armata

"But I don't know my birthday."

"Clearly, that's the day when the cloak gives you invincible strength."

"Can you take me to my parents?"

"Follow me," said the peahen.

The Maid hesitated. "Are they still stone?"

"There is no help-help for stone," sang the peahen. "Follow me."

The bird leapt from tree to tree, shying past clearings. The Maid bent low for shelter in the shadows cast by the forest and the mountains. Finally, the bird announced, "Here they are."

In a clearing, darker than the night around it, two stone statues caught fragments of moonlight which gave them their only color and texture. The Maid crept closer. The man, the King, and the woman, the Queen, clutched each other. The King's sword lay rusting in the grass.

"He dropped his sword?" asked the Maid.

"Preoccupied," said the peahen.

"Can they ever escape?"

"If the ogres reverse their spell. And in the meantime," said the peahen, "at least they have each other."

The Maid asked, "Where is the Prince?"

"Today, I help-helped a young man through the forest. He too promised to kill the ogres. He, too, got turned to stone."

"Show me," demanded the Maid. As dawn lighted their way, the peahen led her to where a stone statue stood guard against a thick tree. Thus, the Prince had protected his back. Seeing him turned to stone sent a tremble through the Maid like a sudden wind.

The Prince held his sword before him in one hand. His back against the tree was firm and tense. But his eyes failed to follow the direction of his sword and his lips were pressed against an object in his left hand. Here the Maid discovered the portrait of a lady. She backed away.

"He paused for a kiss," the peahen explained.

"He came here to kill ogres."

"To win a princess."

"Where are the ogres?"

"Here," roared two voices. "We are the ogres you asked for."

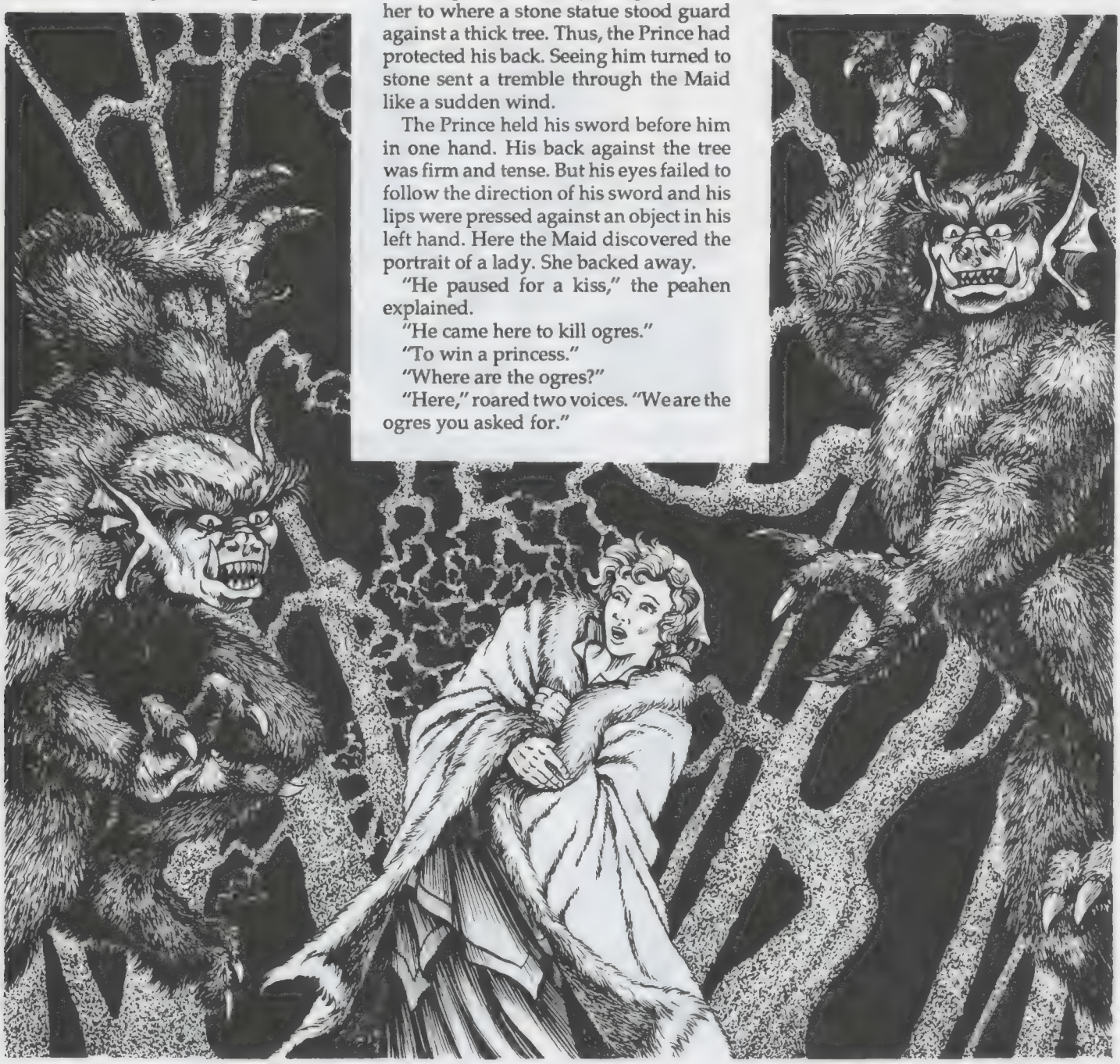
The Maid of Lyn shrank back, and in the midst of her fear she was turned to stone.

The ogres exchanged identical grins of joy. One was male and one was female, but they resembled each other so closely that they had nearly forgotten which was which. "Two statues in two days. We must celebrate," said one.

"Peahen's tongue in wine," suggested the other.

"Help, help!" screeched the brown bird and fluttered away.

Just then a sheet of stone fell at the ogres' feet. "What is this?" asked the first. "Your statue is cracking my dear. Shoddy work, shoddy work."



Artwork by Barb Armata

"My statue? My statue? We worked on her together, dear heart. Another piece has fallen off and I'm sure it is yours. Fix it quick."

The ogres summoned all their magic but the stone cracked faster than spells could mend. The Maid turned back to flesh.

"Today," she shouted, "is my birthday. In my cloak, I am invincible." The Maid lifted a huge chunk of the rock that had fallen from her. "Die!" she commanded.

"Wait, wait," said the ogres both at once. "Let us live and we'll free everyone we ever turned into stone. Did we take your parents, did we take your Prince? We'll free them."

"I'll kill you and set them free."

"No, no," said the ogres. "You don't understand. If you kill us they'll be locked in stone forever. Free us, and we'll free those you came to save."

"But then," said the Maid, "you'll still haunt these mountains."

"What concern is that to you?" said the ogres. "You'll have your loved ones."

"My loved ones?"

"Those whom you hold in your heart and your thoughts."

"They've held each other. In my heart and my thoughts these years, all I've ever held is you!" And she killed them both at once.

The Maid returned to Lyn, leading Prince Michael's horse as proof of her deeds. When she told her story, nobody quite believed her but they were enchanted by her new voice, which exactly matched in tone the perfect note of the golden horn. Moreover, the diamonds in the single rein made her the wealthiest resident of Lyn, even after she paid back the mayor. The Trumpeter proclaimed her Queen of Lyn and proposed himself as King. The people agreed (why not?) and the Maid accepted the former post at least. She ruled in Lyn thereafter and for a long time after that. Nobody mentioned happiness but up to now nobody thought to ask.

❧

Sharon Bailly is a professional technical writer in New Jersey. Her short stories have been published in *Space & Time*, *Karamu*, and the *Boston Review*, among other magazines.

Barb Armata is a native of the Northern Berkshires and lives in Adams, Massachussetts. She has dabbled in several areas of art, doing commercial signs and ads, comics, illustration, and paintings. Her depictions of "the odd, the alien and the everyday" can be seen at Northeast sf art shows such as Boskone.

Letters

RFD: RURAL FANTASY DELIVERY

Sunny Rogers, Laurel Hill, NC

As a fantasy fan/lover I most definitely want your magazine to succeed, but I have to tell you that up until a few years ago I had no idea it existed. Why is it that grocery, drug, and book stores in rural areas, such as mine, do not carry magazines such as yours?

We don't use the big national distributors because they tear the covers off the unsold copies, then throw away (or, hopefully recycle) the magazine, which we find abhorrent. Also, some of them take such a deep discount that we actually lose money by using them. If you want local stores to carry FANTASY, send us their addresses and we'll contact them personally. — REH

SO, WHAT *IS* A "SHARED WORLD"?

Deborah Niven, Salt Lake City, UT

This is my first issue of *FANTASY* so maybe I am drawing conclusions too quickly, but one thing bothered me a bit: it seemed some of the artists' renderings weren't true to the things described in the stories. Do the artists read the stories first, or are they just given an idea about what to draw? Also, could you be more specific in telling me what a "Shared World" story is? It is mentioned as a don't on the writers' guidelines. "Glasswings" seemed like a shared world story to me.

The artists are given the stories to read and are told what kinds of spaces they need to fill. The rest is up to them (although they usually consult with Rachel about subject matter). "Shared World" stories are set in a world created by someone else (e.g., Darkover, Pern) or created by a group of authors (e.g., Thieves' World). Serious copyright problems can arise from publishing stories of this sort. — JAR

A PAT AND A PAN

Marguerite Mooers, Potsdam, NY

I would like to say a word of thanks — thanks for being around. Thank you for aggressively encouraging beginning writers. In a world where it seems new fiction and new writers are largely ignored if not actively discouraged, you go out of your way to recognize our efforts, to support our tries, to applaud, define, guide, and foster our writing. You show that a magazine that encourages new writers can be as well-written and well-illustrated as a magazine that only publishes "known" writers.

Frank O. Dodge, Gonzales, LA

So you turned down number fourteen, "Fear the Cub", submitted January 4th. Big deal. I sold it March 1st. I counted 'em up. I've placed nine of the fourteen stories you rejected, so there, smartie...nyah, nyah, nyah. You STILL haven't heard the last of me.

JENNIFER ROBERSON FAN CLUB

Stephanie Anderson, Chandler, AZ

I am writing to you on the behalf of Jennifer Roberson's fan club "Children of the Firstborn". Jennifer Roberson's most acclaimed novels are from her Cheysuli and Sword Dancer series. This fan club is now expanding hence my request for you to publish a blurb about it in your next issue. The newsletter contains readers' opinions/discussions, creative works, messages and even a personal letter from Jennifer. For more information, send a SASE to: Children of the Firstborn, 610 N. Alma School Road, Suite 18 Box 104, Chandler, AZ 85224.

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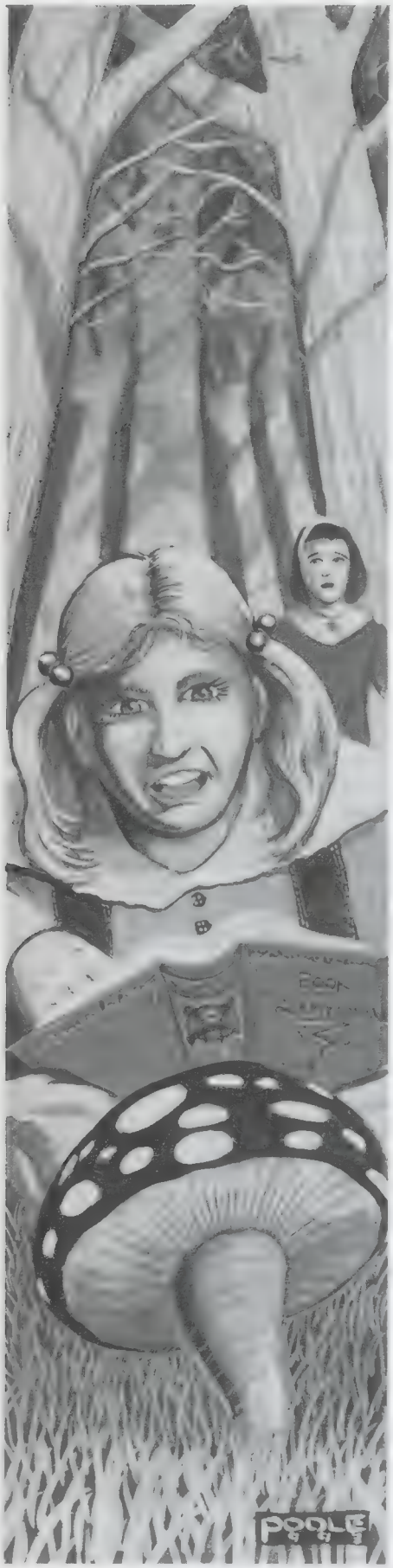


Artwork by Mark Poole

Sandy's Bogeyman

by Deirdre M. Murphy

"You have to pay it with a real silver coin." Sandy's grey eyes stared at me solemnly, and I put my brush down and nodded solemnly back. I was eleven, too old to really believe in bogeymen. But Sandy was three years younger than I, and she was more serious than I could be. While we played, the pretend world was real to her in a way it couldn't be to me any more.

But if I didn't pretend to the same seriousness, there'd be no game, and none of the special togetherness the games fostered. I went to my closet wishing she'd chosen something easier to come by — some of our own blood, say, or a dead mouse. Or at least something of hers. I rummaged in my coin collection until I found a beat-up old dime. "Will this do?"

She scrutinized it carefully, looking around the whole rim before nodding and pocketing it. "I'll say the spells over it. Is the poster done?"

The poster was supposedly an art project — if Mom asked. It had a circle with a star in it inside another star inside a circle, with arcane symbols copied out of an old calculus book all over it in neon poster paints. The shapes were a little ragged, and where I'd run out of symbols, I filled in with spiders and beetles. In the very center, a six-inch circle was left completely blank. "There's not much space left to paint on, except the middle. You said to leave the middle blank."

She frowned critically. "It's ugly."

I sucked in a deep breath, but before I could say what was on my mind, she added, "It will work," and picked it up off the desk. I suppose she said spells over it too.

"You'll be there tonight, won't you?" She looked up at me, her face drawn tight with either uncertainty or fear. It was the same kind of look she'd given me the day before, when she'd asked if I *really* believed in the bogeyman.

"Of course I'll be there. I said I would." I didn't tell her this was all sounding sillier and sillier. I didn't tell her magic was a lie and a waste of time.

Maybe I should have. But then, maybe if I had, Leon would still be living here and beating up on Mom.

That's what started it, you know. Sandy was never interested in spells before Leon moved in. But right after he did, he started hitting Mom. I don't know why she let him stay — fear, maybe. Or maybe she let him hit her to protect us kids somehow. I know I was scared of him.

I think I knew about the beatings from the very first, but Mom and I conspired to hide them from Sandy. But one day, Sandy saw him. I was there. We were walking in from the playground, and there was loud music coming from inside. I dropped my book and bent to pick it up, and Sandy skipped ahead and opened the door.

I looked up to see her face go white with shock, then red with anger. I saw her fists tighten and felt a rush of fear for her, followed by a wash of shame that she had more courage than I. Still, I dropped

my book again and darted forward, lifting her and pulling her back outside with me.

"Let go!" She hit me on the arms and shoulders. "He's hurting Mom."

"You're too little to even get away from me — how do you think you can stop him?" I squeezed her tight enough to hurt, and then we were both crying and saying we were sorry we'd hurt each other. We hid in the bushes until he left.

When he saw my book lying on the sidewalk, he kicked it into Mom's flower bed, knocking over some of the daffodils and getting it all muddy. We were watching him climb into his red Mustang after that when Sandy first said, "I'm gonna get rid of him."

There was such anger, such determination in her voice that I was afraid. Both of her and for her, I think. It made me glad neither Mom nor Leon had a gun.

I was relieved when she asked me to take occult books out of the library for her. Let her cast all the spells she liked — it would probably get her into less trouble than I'd been in when, the first time I'd seen him hurt Mom, I'd wished him damned to hell. He'd laughed — a nasty laugh that made my skin crawl — but Mom washed my mouth out with Dial Soap and spanked me so hard I couldn't sit down.

I didn't even mind seeing her in the forest preserve, arguing heatedly with the nearest mushroom. "What do you mean, that's not right?" she'd yell, or "It says so right there," pointing at one of the books I'd found her.

But then Sandy came to me and said she'd figured a way to do it, and asked me if I believed in the bogeyman. I looked her in the eye and said, "Of course." That's when she asked me to paint the poster: stars, circles, and "arcane" symbols.

"What kind of symbols?"

"Mysterious ones. They should be symbols of things Leon won't understand or will be afraid of."

Well, Leon didn't seem afraid of anything, so I looked in the attic until I found the most incomprehensible book that had symbols in it, and used them.

After she took off with the poster, I put the paints away and went down to set the table. That was my way of protecting Mom — to try to keep things neat and orderly, so there'd be nothing to anger Leon. But that night, I couldn't stop worrying about Sandy. I didn't think she was playing any more. I tripped on the rug and dropped a dish, breaking it and startling Leon so he spilled his Budweiser across the sports section.

Sandy was cheerful at dinner, even though Leon was grumpy, and my heart ached for the failure I knew her magic would be. She seemed so sure it would work — she didn't even play sick when Leon griped about the messy house, a tactic she'd taken up to try to keep Mom safe by her bedside until Leon fell asleep. Sometimes it worked.

After dinner, she came up to me and twined her fingers in mine, "Read me a story?" And then I couldn't back out without a scene. I had thought about it — about delaying until the next day, at least, to put off her disappointment. And besides, to be honest, I was starting to get a creepy feeling about the whole thing.

She led me to her room, where she'd pushed all the furniture around so it was all behind the bed. She positioned me on it, kneeling, with firm instructions to repeat everything she said until she made the slit-throat sign with her fingers. After that, I was to stay silent, concentrating on keeping our family whole and safe. "You're my anchor," she said seriously.

The poster was in the center of the floor, carefully oriented so the longest arm of the slightly lopsided star pointed out toward the rest of the house. Sandy knelt at one side of it, and started chanting. There was a phrase of nonsense syllables — I garbled it the first time, and she stopped, lifted up the poster and set it face down, and spent ten minutes teaching it to me — "Allyadadin tyalinnin myralintic zam" — until I could pronounce it to her satisfaction. When I mumbled, she told me to speak more clearly, and I wondered where she'd learned the phrase. Or if she'd just made it up.

Then she turned the poster over again, carefully adjusting it so it pointed exactly where she wanted it to. The chanting started again. She called on the bogeyman, "Allyadadin tyalinnin myralintic zam", told him about Leon Jameson Ames (even while I was repeating the magic phrase, I wondered how she'd found out what the J stood for — he hadn't even told Mom that), and so on.

After a while, she brought out the coin, which had been polished to a bright shine. She placed it in the exact center of the central circle on the poster, positioning it perfectly in a single graceful motion, so that I knew she had to have practiced it over and over. After the last "zam", she drew her finger swiftly across her throat and gave me a pointed look, and I remembered I was supposed to concentrate on our safety.

That wasn't hard — I could hear raised voices coming from another part of the house, so I couldn't help but be concerned for Mom. And I was already afraid of how Sandy would feel when her magic didn't work.

Sandy started a high keening — not loud, but all the more eerie for that. I thought she was making the syllables up as she went along — until she started repeating them. Exactly. There were three phrases, each repeated three times. At the third repetition of the third phrase, the bed moved, and I started to be truly afraid. I had never been much for God, but I started to pray. Silently, as I'd been told to.

Sandy paused, pointed to the coin, then started again, on an even higher note. The bed moved under me so much that I had to hunker down into a small ball to feel I wouldn't be thrown off of it. Sandy's voice was louder now, but so were the voices outside.

Sandy paused again, moving against the wall near the door, as far from the bed as she could get. Her face was strained with effort, and pale. She looked at me, and I nodded, trying to reassure her I was still her "anchor". She then started in on the wailing again, louder than I'd ever heard her before or since. I was sure Mom or Leon would come to shut her up, but between phrases, I could still hear him yelling. Couldn't he hear her?

When she got to the third phrase, a dark shadowy hand reached out from under the bed to touch the coin. While she repeated it, it caressed the coin. I could see the coin — and the poster — through it. The bugs I had painted seemed to move, seen through it.

Then, when she repeated that third phrase for what turned out to be the last time, a whole shadowy figure slunk out from under the bed. It flowed upward until it seemed to stand on the floor, straddling the poster. It was tall and bulky, with wide shoulders, and arms that sometimes seemed long and snake-like, then the next minute thick and muscular. It looked at her and it looked at me and I wanted to be invisible. Somehow Sandy had made the bogeyman real.

I shrank against the covers, praying for safety. It looked solid, and yet you could see through it like it was made of dense smoke. Its outline wavered and made my head hurt, so I closed my eyes. But still I seemed to see it, its red eyes as solemn as Sandy's, watching me.

I heard a bang and looked up. The bogeyman had looked away from me,

Artwork by Mark Poole

toward Sandy, who was now standing by an open doorway. She pointed out and down, to where the yelling was coming from. "Take him away. Take him away forever."

The bogeyman slunk out the door, and Sandy followed. I shrank against the covers, but then heard a dull thunk and my mother's moan of pain, and I darted off the bed. Was the horror Sandy had called hurting Mom?

I ran down the stairs to see blood on Mom's face and Leon's knuckles, and the shadow between him and her prone form on the living room floor. Leon had knocked her cold. I stood there stupidly on the bottom step, staring as it swung at him, low and nasty, so he doubled over with a howl. I thought he was going to hit the shadow with his head, but it slid to one side, its body arching unnaturally, like smoke in the wind.

"God damn," Leon swore, swinging at the bogeyman. It froze when he spoke, and he hit it hard. It fell over and lay there, motionless.

Sandy started keening again and it got up, again ready to fight. The place on its arm where it had been hit stayed dented, but that didn't seem to slow it down any.

Leon's hits never landed, except when he was taking the Lord's name in vain. Of course, Leon cussed a lot, so the bogeyman had a rough time of it. I don't know what to think of a God that lets His name be used that way, but I never stopped praying — and Sandy never stopped her wailing.

It seemed like a long time, but finally the bogeyman knocked Leon out. It bent and picked him up, then headed toward the stairs. Leon's weight bent it out of shape, like a deformed hunchback, but it didn't seem to notice. I saw its red eyes on me and froze, moving only when Sandy yanked hard on my arm. It went past me and up the stairs, so close that Leon's bloody hand brushed against my hair. Sandy, still keening though her voice was cracking, followed, pulling me after.

We got to her room just in time to see a shadowy foot disappear under the bed. The poster lay on the floor, its point now facing the bed, and a silver line-drawing of Leon filling the center circle. Sandy smiled in satisfaction on seeing it, and motioned me to the bed again. I climbed gingerly on top, afraid to go near it, but more afraid to refuse her.

She inspected the poster, where Leon's new likeness shone, every belligerent line accurate. Her smile scared me as much as the bogeyman's eyes had. She started to whisper a new spell. To make the bogeyman go away again, I hoped. I prayed she did this one as well as the earlier ones. I prayed — I don't even know what I prayed, except for my own safety, and Mom's.

When she was done, she picked up the poster and put it in her closet. We had to call an ambulance, and they called the police. When they asked us where Leon went, we just said he "went away", and we didn't know where to. The sergeant thought it was mighty odd he'd left his car and clothes and all behind, but it was clear two little kids and an unconscious woman couldn't have spirited him away, so after searching the house he shook his head and went away.

They had to call our aunt to take care of us while Mom was in the hospital; and the doctor convinced Mom to go see a therapist. She figures that God saved her from Leon — but that He probably won't send a miracle a second time. She'll be okay.

But now, when Sandy comes to my room, that familiar lonely look on her face, and wants to play, I can't meet her eyes.

It's not like I'm not lonely too. It's just that when I look at her, all I can see are red eyes gleaming, and I freeze, as if by being still I could be invisible, and safe. ❧

Deirdre Murphy lives in Milwaukee with two cats and "a crazy cook", works as a secretary, plays the autoharp, and writes songs and is working on her second degree in Anthropology. This story is her first professionally-published piece of prose fiction.

Mark Poole has a B.A. degree in fine arts from the University of SC. His early influences were Marvel Comics, sf, and fantasy novels. Three years ago, while living in isolation in Lexington, SC, he stumbled upon his very first convention. From that point on he has been very focussed and busy. He has won awards, been published, and produced several prints of his high fantasy work. He primarily works in acrylics. He has a wife of five years, and owns a small puff of a mutt named Gizmo.

STAR-FISHING

Lynn Coulter

"And this," the court sorcerer boasted, swinging wide the heavy door, "is my private chamber!"

Lillith lifted her skirts to avoid the cobwebs and dust that swirled along the floor as the door swept open. "Wonderful!" she exclaimed, shading her eyes until her vision could adjust to the bright light.

It *was* a wondrous room. Ceiling to floor, windows lined the walls, washing the chamber in golden sunlight. Parrots and macaws, their feathers flapping in a blur of purple, blue, and scarlet-red, squawked from bamboo cages hanging in every corner. Iron-staved barrels sat here and there, and on every shelf and tabletop vials and glass jars jostled shoulder to shoulder, their cork stoppers barely containing their shimmering, rainbow-hued contents, mysterious liquids which bubbled and boiled merrily.

The sorcerer threw back his star-embroidered robes of midnight blue and perched on a stool, raising another cloud of dust motes to dance in the sunshine. "Sit, sit," he urged his guest.

Lillith gingerly took the proffered seat atop a heap of oversized magic books, a staggering pile which threaten to spill her onto the floor at any moment.

"Now how can I be of assistance to you?" asked the sorcerer. He stroked his long, gray beard and cocked his head to eye her appraisingly. "It's not every day that the royal family's governess calls on the court wizard."

Lillith smiled. "Sorcerer, it can be no surprise to you that I'm soon to be retired from my post as governess."

The sorcerer shook his head sympathetically. He had produced a blushing-red apple from the folds of his robe and circled his finger around and around it now. Obediently, the apple skin began to peel itself away from the fruit and snake toward the dusty floor in a continuous, satiny-red ribbon. "The young prince will be crowned soon," he agreed. "I suppose your duties are finished here. Where will you go?"

"That's just it. I've nowhere to go, no one who needs me now." Lillith sighed, pensively winding a loose tendril of her silver hair around her index finger. "The King's very generous, of course. He plans to fete me with a banquet upon my retirement from court, and he's ordered a lovely cottage to be built upon the grounds that will be my new home." She watched as the macaws and parrots swung crazily on their wooden perches and pecked at the apple slices the sorcerer fed to them through the cage bars.

"I've grown old, Sorcerer," she continued, her voice soft and low. "We don't plan to grow old, do we? And yet it happens, and those of us who have no families, who have only had our work, find ourselves lost and lonely near the twilight of our years."

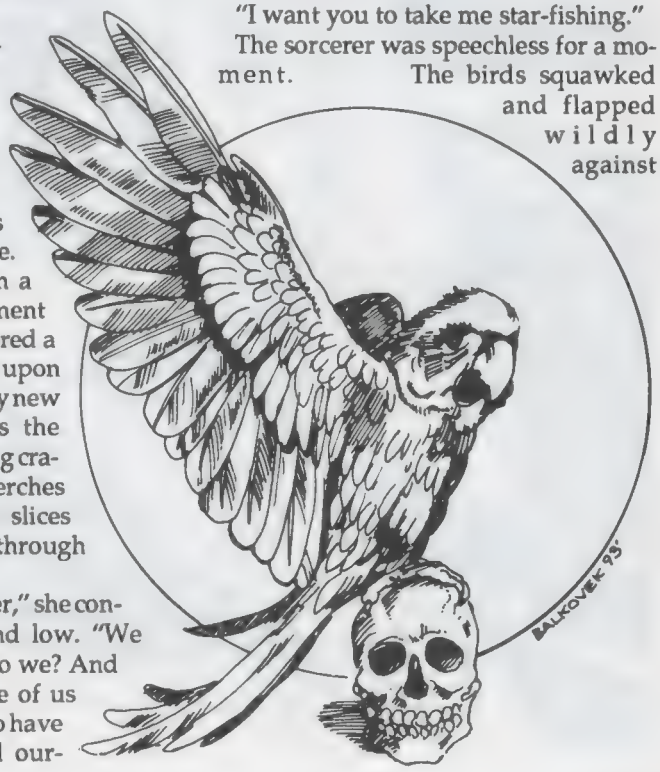
The sorcerer stroked a parrot's beak with his forefinger and looked thoughtful. "And you thought I might help you with something new you wish to do?"

Lillith lifted her chin and straightened her shoulders. "Yes. We've known each other for many years, old friend, and I feel bold enough to beg a favor."

The sorcerer fingered his long beard. "And that is...?"

"I want you to take me star-fishing."

The sorcerer was speechless for a moment. The birds squawked and flapped wildly against



Artwork by James Balkovek

their bars.

"What do you know about star-fishing?"

Lillith laughed. "You think a governess keeps her head in books all the time? Many nights as I sit at my window enjoying the evening air, I've seen you leave the castle with your nets and charms. I've guessed enough to know that those aren't ordinary fish you bring home in a basket next morning."

The sorcerer threw back his head and laughed so heartily the sound echoed around the room. "All right, then! You're a smart woman, indeed." Then he shook his head soberly. "But star-fishing involves great magic, my dear lady. When a sorcerer catches a star, it must grant his or her wish — but the magic is far too powerful for a mere mortal. And only the one who catches a star may receive a wish. No one's been able to grant another's wish." He shook his head regretfully. "Yours is a request I cannot fulfill."

Lillith forced a smile and nodded. "So be it, then. I'll not press an old friend for more." She walked over to the tall windows and looked out, watching as the sun began to melt into the far hills, staining the sky with the first purple shades of evening. "Almost time to dine, Sorcerer. Will you escort me in this evening?"

The sorcerer hopped off his stool and offered her his arm. "It shall be my privilege."

The sorcerer escorted her out and drew shut the heavy door behind them, then locked it with a small, brass key and dropped the key into the pocket of his flowing robes. As he walked with her down the hall, talking animatedly of his beloved birds, Lillith gently slipped one hand into his billowing pocket and stole his chamber key.

It was past midnight when Lillith tiptoed down the castle staircase, shivering as the cold of the marble steps crept through her thin slippers. At the bottom she paused to catch her breath, listening for anyone who might be stirring about. All quiet. She tossed her silvery braids over her shoulders and drew her night clothes more closely about her. Across the hall, a candle left burning in the sorcerer's chambers flickered through a crack under the heavy door.

Lifting her skirts, Lillith ran across the hall and fitted the key into the lock. Her pulse raced wildly. Don't fail me now, old heart, she thought, as the tumblers of

the lock clicked open. She slipped inside, gently shutting the door behind her.

In the sputtering candle's glow Lillith paused, her back pressed against the door, to catch her breath. Her hands ached, and she massaged them together gently. How unfair, she thought, to feel so full of life when the body lets one down. Even in the candlelight she could see her thin, blue veins through the skin on the backs of her hands, and her knotted and twisted joints and fingers. Time was taking a bitter toll.

She determined not to be a victim of fate. Lillith took a deep breath and dragged a short barrel along the floor until it was underneath the highest shelf in the sorcerer's chamber. Then she climbed upon the barrel and felt around on the shelf overhead until her hand touched what she was seeking.

It was late the next afternoon before Lillith was able to make her excuses and slip away, alone, to the stream where she knew the sorcerer often fished for stars. Nervously she brushed aside a honeybee who circled her head, droning monotonously in her ears. She had to hurry. If the sorcerer missed what she had taken...

She removed something folded as small as a ladies' handkerchief from her pocket and shook it out on the grass. It was the sorcerer's fishing net, rather ordinary-looking except for the mysterious fiber from which it was spun. Its strands shimmered in the afternoon sun like polished, black coal. Although surprisingly light, it was flexible and strong.

No wonder the sorcerer doted upon it. It had been given to him, he told Lillith, when he was an apprentice, to catch stars in. Stars, the sorcerer explained, were as old as time and held all its secrets. If you wondered how a king of old had fortified his castle against his enemies, you took the net to a stream and waited until dark, when the image of the stars fell upon still water. There, by fishing patiently, you might catch a star. Imprisoned, the star would share with you the secrets of battles it had witnessed throughout history. If your heart yearned for some secret desire, you fished for a star, confided your wish, and let it go with hope and faith. Our fates were in the stars, the sorcerer told Lillith, and controlled all that was past and all that was yet to come.

Now Lillith shielded her eyes as the slanting rays of the sun fell into the stream. As night came on, an evening breeze would blow the graceful limbs of the weeping willows on the banks away from the water, and she would have an unobstructed view of the evening sky. From the hills beyond, Lillith heard the bells of a distant abbey calling the novices and nuns to vespers. Day is almost finished, she thought. And my work as court governess is almost finished, too. She looked up and saw the pale shadow of the moon

peeking out of a still-blue sky. It is time to begin anew, she thought. My wish is that I shall not be bound by time.

The court sorcerer leaned upon his elbows and gazed out his windows at the setting sun, then straightened and rubbed his neck. He was tired and needed a diversion from his duties. A cockatoo squawked to him, and he found a bit of bread to press into her beak. The birds were telling him the sky would be clear and cold tonight, perfect for star-fishing. He fetched a stool and felt along his highest shelf for his fishing net. Suddenly, with his seer's intuition, he heard his net calling for him, and knew.

Lillith nibbled at the cheese and fruit she'd brought for her supper as she waited for darkness to fall. Patiently she watched as one star twinkled above her, and then another, and another. Soon the sky was full of stars, like the million candles that would blaze in the Great Hall on the Prince's coronation day, signaling the end of her duties as governess. She leaned over the stream and peered in. Under gently rippling waves, she could see all the way to the bottom. And from the sandy bottom, stars beamed back up at her. She wondered if the stream was reflecting the evening sky, or whether the magic was already working, and the stars were lying there like living, glowing starfish at the bottom of a calm sea, waiting for her to pluck one.

She unfurled the sorcerer's net and cast it upon the water.

"Stop," cried the sorcerer as he ran down the bank to the stream. He stopped, panting, at the water's edge. The night was cool and dark. Somewhere in the woods behind him, wings fluttered in the black treetops, and an owl hooted. A basket of food sat on the bank, but no one answered his calls.

He feared he was too late and anxiously walked along the stream, searching the skies overhead. Then he knew and understood, and his heart felt gladdened and joyful. One star, which seemed smaller and newer than the rest in the firmament, caught his eye, twinkling down at him with a familiar light, a light as blue as his old friend's lovely eyes. The sorcerer smiled then, reading in its contented glow that his friend had been granted her wish tonight. Immortality, it seemed, was in the stars.

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Lynn Coulter has been published in *First for Women*, the Atlanta newspapers, and literary reviews. This is her second story in *FANTASY Magazine*. She received a degree in journalism from Georgia State University and worked for Eastern Air Lines until its closure gave her the impetus to turn to writing.

James Balkovek is a graduate of the California College of Arts and Crafts, has illustrated numerous children's and educational books and has over twenty years of illustration and design experience.

Artwork by James Balkovek

Interview with Mercedes Lackey

by Elisabeth Waters

(This interview took place in the RV belonging to Misty and her husband Larry Dixon, shortly after they abducted me from my place of residence on December 30, 1992. After we arrived at their RV, parked on a desolate stretch of bluff overlooking the Pacific Ocean, and my stomach recovered sufficiently from the drive over winding hilly roads with occasional glimpses of surf pounding against crumbling cliffs, I began to notice my surroundings.)

Uh, this certainly is an interesting environment you have here. I see several computers, a printer, a fax, a cellular phone — excuse me, but what is this creature with its claws in my left wrist who is trying to eat my wristwatch?

That's a lory.

Isn't that a large truck?

Actually, it's a large truck and a small bird, which makes things very confusing for English drivers.

And I see that you have another one in that cage over there. They certainly are colorful. Do they have names?

Yes, he's Visyr, and she's Little Girl, although we're considering naming her Maggie after the Simpson's baby because she's sweet, not very bright, and falls down a lot. He's a blue-streak lory, and she's a chattering lory. As you can see, we've got very diverse interests.

Fascinating. But seriously, while Larry is out making phone calls and we are waiting for Mrs. Bradley to make arrangements for my ransom, why don't you tell me something about your career?

I started out as a very small child...

Did you, like Mrs. Bradley, dictate your early works to your mother until you learned to hold a pencil?

Oh, you mean my writing career. No, I began by chiseling them into rocks, back during the Pleistocene.

Gee, that's funny; I could have sworn that you sold your first stories to Mrs. Bradley in the early 80s.

Well, one way or another she really encouraged my career. Between providing a lot of positive feedback and a steady market for my stories, convincing her agent to take me as one of his clients, and mentioning me favorably to Betsy Wollheim at DAW Books, I think she's in no small part responsible for where I am today. She's shoved a lot of us into professional careers.

Did you study any writing-related courses in school?

Actually, yes, I did. I took an honors course in creative writing at Purdue University. But I was convinced at the time that writers starved to death, so I went into Biology, where I promptly starved to death — well, not quite to death, but certainly into a size eleven, which I haven't seen in years.

Why did you chose to write fantasy?

Because I loved it.

Do you think it's easier to research than science fiction?

No, it's a different kind of research. Researching for science fiction involves not so much knowing the hard science as knowing who to ask specific hard science questions of. Very few of us, after all, are physicists! Research for fantasy involves knowing what period of Earth-history your book approximates, finding day-to-day life information on that period, and using that as your pattern. When you deviate from the pattern (as in flush-toilets in a medieval-type setting) you have to be able to recognize the fact that you are deviating and come up with a reason why such a deviation exists. That gives you a consistent universe, and a consistent universe is one that readers can believe in.

In your **HERALD** *books, you use horse-like animals. Did you ever own a horse?*

Never did, always wanted to. We will probably be able to get a pair of horses very shortly, now that we have the acreage to support them, and someone who knows horse-care inside and out living with us [Victor Wren, Larry's new assistant].

Did you ever have to take care of one?

Now and again. Never for very long, but enough to know that it is real live work. That's why my more recent books (**WINDS OF FATE, WINDS OF CHANGE**, and **WINDS OF FURY**) have Afterwords about the great amount of work required to care for horses and birds. I had visions of well-meaning people trying to go out and trap themselves hawks, thinking they were going to get bond-birds. That's strictly illegal and very dangerous, both to the human and the bird.

I know that you have fans who call themselves Heralds and Mages. Have you had any problems with them?

The ones that are in the organized fan club have to earn those ranks. They sometimes joke that I'm creating the 'Herald Scouts of America'. So really, they're actually accomplishing a great deal of improvement in their lives and sometimes in the lives of people around them, because we give credit towards earning a rank for things like public service, volunteer work, learning a skill, writing research papers, that kind of thing. For instance, anyone earning a Herald-Mage rank has to learn sleight-of-hand magic tricks, and research and write papers on how such tricks can be used to fake "miracles" or "supernatural events". They are also required to write papers on government, since Herald-Mages were instrumental in both the formation and the administration of Valdemaran government.

What about the ones that aren't in the organized fan club?

I haven't heard anything from anyone who is claiming to be a Herald or a Herald-Mage. But I do get occasional complaints from people who feel I'm not politically correct enough or that I'm not doing enough that corresponds to their personal agenda. And my reply has always been, "If you want that kind of book, write it yourself. I write to entertain, not to preach." As Robert Heinlein once remarked, "It's a sad writer who sells his birthright for a pot of message."

Were you surprised by the popularity of your books?

Absolutely astonished. It's something that every writer always hopes for, but the wise writer never expects will happen.

Aside from Mrs. Bradley, who else has influenced your work?

C.J. Cherryh, absolutely. She was, in fact, my mentor. She literally critiqued every single one of my manuscripts up until **MAGIC'S PRICE**. Someday they're going to be worth a lot of money, because of all the rude things she wrote in the margins.

And you wrote short stories for her, too, didn't you?

Yes, for her Merovingian Nights series. And that was another unexpected invitation. I had never anticipated being asked to participate right from the beginning in a shared-world anthology. It was a lot of fun.

You're now in the process of editing a Valdemar anthology, right?

Yes, and that's a by-invitation-only anthology. I don't have the energy Mrs. Bradley has to provide criticism and guidance for dozens of young writers at a time, so I'm limiting the anthology to fellow professionals.

You've also collaborated on several series of novels. How do you choose your collaborators?

In the case of someone who has not been published before, it has to be someone I know very well, whose work has progressed to the point where I feel they are ready to break into professional publishing, and most of all has an absolutely professional attitude. By that I mean someone who is able to take criticism, and to use it, not complain about it, who is able to take direction, and who understands that it's not a personal insult, it's meant to make their work better. In the case of people like Ru Emerson, C.J. Cherryh, Marion Zimmer Bradley, Anne McCaffrey, and Andre Norton, it was somebody whose work I profoundly respected and whose personality and ideas meshed with mine closely enough that I knew we could work together.

Describe your writing routine. Do you have any special rituals, like sharpening all your pencils?

Actually, turning on my computer is as arcane as I ever get. I tend to write at night — I am a night person — I absolutely require a steady supply of caffeine, either in the form of diet cola or coffee, and I have no choice — I have to write with Visyr on my shoulder. His cage is in my office and he absolutely refuses to allow me to write without his participation and critique.

So he's sort of like your bond-bird?

Nah. Bond-birds aren't that critical.

Just how does he express his criticism? Is it constructive?

I supposed you could call it constructive. He normally leaves a deposit on the outline when he doesn't approve of what I'm writing.

But I just saw a set of bound page proofs that he apparently disapproved of.

Actually he disapproved of the fact that there weren't any pictures in the page proofs. He's very fond of pictures.

Especially the ones your husband draws?

Especially the ones my husband draws — he thinks they're very tasty.

How do you go about working from an outline — assuming that one of the birds hasn't eaten it first, of course?

This is something C.J. Cherryh taught me. I start out with a one-page proposal, I expand that to a five-page general outline, then I expand that to a 40 to 60-page detailed outline. I work out all the plot complexities in that last outline. This is where I see if I have written myself into a corner, if I need to beef up a particular character's role, or if I've done something that contradicts an earlier book. Once I've got that outline in place, I work directly from it, knowing that my pacing is going to be approximately ten to fifteen pages of prose from every page of outline, so I have a good idea of how big the book is going to be before I even start on it.

How much effort do you put into making sure that you don't contradict an earlier book? I know a lot of authors don't worry about it much, and certainly the more books you write, the harder the job must be.

Yes, it is very hard to make sure you aren't contradicting something earlier, and I put a lot of effort into it, to the point of having proofreaders besides myself go over the outline. Largely this is self-defense, because I don't want to have to deal with all the letters that arrive pointing out any contradictions that I might make.

I guess that's the down side of having a lot of enthusiastic fans. Do you have any sort of concordance for your own use?

As a matter of fact, a concordance is being put together for me, by Juanita Coulson. It will be available as a series of pamphlets from Firebird, and it satisfies both those with the insatiable thirst for detail and my need to keep things straight.

How many series do you have going now?

Let's see. There is, of course, the Valdemar series. Larry and I will be starting an earlier series in that world, about the Mage Wars, beginning with **THE BLACK GRYPHON**. The Vows and Honor series is set in the same world, and overlaps the Valdemar series. Then there's the Diana Tregarde series, which is occult thrillers. There is the Bedlam Bards series, which Ellen Guon and I are doing, the SERRAted Edge series that has been a showcase for three of my protégés, and the Bardic Voices series, which is solo work. There's a spin-off series from that one, called Bardic Choices, which will have a collaboration with me and Josepha Sherman, and there's the Bard's Tale series, based on the computer game of the same name. On that last, we took a somewhat different approach from other computer-game-based books, because we did not write "the book of the game". Instead, we used the world of the game as our general setting, and wrote the kind of character-based story I usually do within that world. We had a lot of fun with all of them, keeping our tongues sometimes in our cheeks. Watch for the cross-dressing elves in **CASTLE OF DECEPTION**, the "Jeeves" character in **FORTRESS OF FROST AND FIRE**, and the AMA in **PRISON OF SOULS**!

Larry [returning from his phone calls and leaning over Lisa's computer]- What happens if I push this button?

I don't know. What sort of afterlife do you believe in? [Larry retreats to the other end of the RV.] *I noticed earlier that you have a lot of computer equipment here, as well as the animals. Did you leave*

anything at home, or is everything you need to write with you?

I have everything I need to write with me. However, I like to alternate between using the laptop and the larger computer with the color monitor because it's easier on the eyes of someone who spends a large portion of the day — or night — in front of the computer screen.

And the large computer and the color monitor are at home?

Yes. And of course, Larry does a lot of his artwork on the computer.

So you can work on the road, but it's more comfortable at home?

Yes, although we love being on the road. Between computer services that we can log onto from a pay phone and our cellular phone we can always be reached by anyone who needs to find us. And it's great to pack up and get away from home once in a while, not the least because every time we do, our collaborator and secretary Mark Shepherd cleans the house when we're gone!

Where is your home, and what is it like? Do you keep more animals there?

Well, we live in a little town outside of Tulsa, Oklahoma, and we live in what we refer to as the weirdest house in Oklahoma.

Q- *Was this reference before or after you moved in?*

This was before we moved in. We were probably a real estate agent's dream. We went to our agent and said, "Show us everything you can't sell." We looked at old churches, Moose lodges, an earth-sheltered house with a waterfall in the bathroom, built into the top of a very tall hill. And in the end, we bought a house that was a house inside a house. The inside house is a two-and-a-half story concrete dome, covered by a five story wooden frame octagonal shell. All of the rooms have very interesting shapes. There isn't a square room in the house, and one of my falconer friends pointed out that we could train merlins completely inside the house, mostly in the living room.

Do you have any merlins?

Not yet, but we hope to one day. Apprentice falconers, which is what Larry and I are, are permitted only red-tail hawks or kestrels. Right now the only wild bird we have, who is under permit, is a non-releasable bluejay named Rodan. Apprentice falconers must first pass an eighteen-page federal exam, then have their facilities inspected by a federal wildlife agent, before getting their permit for their first bird. They must trap it themselves, and it must be a passage-bird, that is, a bird in its first year after fledging — you can tell that by its plumage, since most hawks and falcons have different feather-colors when they are adults (haggards) than when they are juveniles (passagers). Then the falconer must train and hunt birds for two years before graduating to "general" falconer, which is when he is permitted to have birds other than redtails or kestrels.

So you own three birds, Rodan and the two lories?

No we own just the two lories. You don't own native birds, you only hold custody of them under Federal permit.

Do you have any other animals?

We have three cats, and a dog. The vet thinks the dog is a pitbull/greyhound cross, who somehow got the best traits of both breeds. Somebody smacked her on the head with a hammer and left her to die, and she showed up on our doorstep and we took her in. When we took her to the vet to be spayed, everybody on the vet's staff remarked on how sweet-tempered she was. The cats are all neutered as well. I feel very strongly about responsible pet ownership.

What projects are you working on now? (Besides my ransom, of course.)

Currently I'm writing a third book in the Winds trilogy (**WINDS OF FURY**), a stand-alone book called **SACRED GROUND**, which is set in Tulsa and is a Tony Hillerman-type mystery whose heroine is both a practicing private investigator and a Osage Medicine Woman.

Unlike Diana Tregarde, who writes romances for a living. Do you plan to do any more books in that series?

Yes, there are two more books in that series: **TRIANGLE PARK** and **ARCANUM 101**. I'll also be beginning a new Valdemar trilogy for DAW, the Storms trilogy (titles to be determined), and Larry and I will be working on **THE BLACK GRYPHON**. We'll also be working on two more SERRAted Edge books (**CHROME CIRCLE** and **TEMPEST FUGIT**). I have two more Bardic Voices books to do, alone (**THE ROBIN AND THE KESTREL** and **THE EAGLE AND THE NIGHTINGALES**). Jo Sherman and I have the Bardic Choices book (**A CAST OF CORBIES**), and Ellen Guon and I are doing the last Bedlam Bards book, which is called **LEAGUES BEYOND WORLD'S END**. I'm also doing another collaboration with Andre Norton, **ELVENBLOOD**, a sequel to **THE ELVENBANE**. And of course, the Darkover collaborations with Marion, the next one of which is **RETURN TO DARKOVER**, a sequel to **SHARRA'S EXILE**.

Gosh, just listening to that list makes me feel tired. How long do you expect all this to take?

Probably through the end of 1994. I write very fast, which is neither a virtue nor a vice; it's simply a characteristic. Jane Yolen writes even faster than I do. I recall one period when she literally was putting out a book a month, all by herself. It may have seemed as though I had a book out every month this past year, but over half of them were collaborations.

What advice would you give to aspiring writers?

The most important thing to do is to write. You don't get anywhere by talking about it incessantly. You don't get anywhere by rewriting the same story over and over again. And you certainly don't get anywhere by thinking that contacts alone will get you published. No professional writer is going to waste their time on someone who not only lacks the talent but also lacks a professional attitude — with the possible exception of Mrs. Bradley, who is more long-suffering than I am; but even she won't do it for very long. There may have been a book or two in the history of publishing that was published because the editor owed someone a favor, but I promise you that author never published a second book. That's because publishing, like almost everything else, is driven by the market, and if something is bad, it doesn't sell, and if it doesn't sell it's a mistake that is not repeated twice. The other piece of advice I can give a beginning author is to study your market. You wouldn't send a sexy nurse novel to DAW (somebody tried this once, but it didn't work), and you wouldn't send a Regency Romance to Baen. It makes no sense to send a work to an editor who doesn't publish that kind of work, because an editor publishes what he likes, and what his readers like. Every editor puts his or her stamp on their line, and if you read a bunch of their books, you can tell what it is. You should also send a SASE for guidelines whenever they are available.

Now about the arrangements for your ransom — Mrs. Bradley says she wants you back—

I'll bet she does; I haven't finished the year-end taxes yet.

Taxes? You do taxes? Maybe we should raise our price.

You wouldn't do that to the woman responsible for starting you on your professional career, would you?

I'll tell you what. I'm gonna make her an offer she can't refuse.

Artwork by Margaret Organ-Kean

The Immature Immortal

by V.L. Heppner

The Enchantress's vine-covered castle was aflame. It had been stormed by knights. On the top floor of the highest tower an oak door creaked open. Jade, a soot-stained, yellow-haired child, motioned six other girls to hurry in.

"All of you, up on the conjuring dais!" she shouted. The smell of burning wood hung in the air.

The girls ranged in age from five to fifteen and wore green dresses. Terrified, they panted from the hurried race up the stairs. From below came the sounds of smashed timbers, clinking swords, and muffled battle-cries. Outside the sun set.

Jade heaved against the oak door, banging it shut. With a grunt she shot the bolt into place. She was thin, with bony elbows, but moved with a sure and deliberate grace.

From up on the conjuring dais the smallest girl asked, "Will the knights kill us?" She was dark-skinned with long black hair. Tears trickled down her face.

"Hush," said the oldest girl. She put her hands on the other's shoulders and gently rocked her back and forth.

Jade moved toward the dais. Though afraid, she wouldn't allow her lips to tremble before the others.

"What's going to happen, Jade?" asked the oldest girl.

"They killed the ogre brothers," wept the smallest girl.

"And our friend the dragon," whimpered another.

"No, I think I saw the dragon fly away," assured a fourth.

Jade wiped at the soot on her cheeks. A loud crash came from below.

"I think the knights broke into the stairwell," said the oldest girl, her eyes wide with fear.

Jade cocked her head. They all heard the jangle of armor as knights clanked up the stairs.

"Listen," said Jade earnestly, "the castle is lost, but that doesn't mean we are. The Enchantress will come back to help us, I'm sure of it. She taught me this one

Artwork by Margaret Organ-Kean

spell, so ready yourselves. Ellen," she spoke to the oldest girl, "you'll be teleported to the Glade. Take the others to the Dragon Cave and wait there for the Enchantress."

"What about you?" Ellen asked.

Jade gave her a very adult shrug. "We'll see. Right now I only have the strength for one spell."

"Can't you come with us?" Ellen pleaded.

Jade shook her head. "No." She stared at the floor and whispered, "The knights killed so many of our friends..." Wiping tears from her eyes, she glanced back up. The sounds of jangling armor grew louder.

"Prepare yourselves." Jade took a sorcerous stance and began to mumble words of power. Artfully she wove her hands through the air in complex patterns. Sweat beaded her forehead and her lips quivered. She gave a last shriek. Blue clouds billowed from the dais and a loud clap sounded. The girls were gone.

Jade slumped to her knees as mailed fists began to hammer at the door. She rose painfully and limped to the rear of the room where a set of chains were embedded in the wall. Taking the key from the lock, she snapped the bracelets onto her wrists, stood on her tiptoes, and tossed the key out through the slit window.

Axes began to thud against the door.

"Harder!" a knight yelled. The axes increased their rhythm. A wood splinter flew from the door; the next moment a steel axe-edge sliced through.

"Move aside!" a knight roared. The door splintered apart under the impact of an armored knight. The blue-cloaked knight staggered into the room, a heavy axe in his mailed fists. He glanced around the room, his visored helmet centering on Jade. Behind him strode big men in chain mail. All wore helmets with crescent symbols. The smell of ale followed them; one of the knights belched.

With an oath the lead knight removed his helmet and handed it to one of his men. He had a rugged, tanned face with calluses on the bridge of his big nose and cheeks. A huge brown mustache bristled from his upper lip, matched by intensely hard brown eyes.

"Who are you?" he asked Jade, advancing slowly.

Jade shrank from him, cowering and trying to cover her thin legs.

The knight glanced at his fellows. He jangled forward and squatted before her. Blood speckled his armor and a puzzled frown belied the distrust in his intense eyes.

"Girl," said one of the gruff knights from the pack, "this is Gunder the Just, Slayer of Tyrants, the Champion of King Dane and Captain of the Steel Legion."

Jade allowed herself to glance up timidly.

Gunder smiled, exposing large white teeth. "Did the evil Enchantress chain you here?"

She gave a timid nod.

He stood with a shout and hefted his axe, his lips bared in a snarl. "Don't move, girl." With easy strength he swung the axe and hammered it against the chain. The links parted and chips of stone flew up where the axe bit into the floor. A chip cut Jade's cheek.

"There," Gunder boomed, "you're free!"

"Free?" Jade asked. She made no move to get up, wiping the blood from her cheek.

"Of course," Gunder said. He winked at his companions. "I'm sure your parents are quite worried about you."

Jade blinked, and finally said, "My parents are dead."

"Dead?" Gunder looked puzzled. He smiled suddenly and shrugged. "Well, surely a nice girl like you can find foster parents."

"Do you think so?"

"Sure, sure," he said, already glancing about the room.

"I wonder where the Enchantress is?" one of the knights said.

"The Enchantress was my foster mother," Jade explained.

"Eh, what's that?" Gunder asked. He looked down on her, his gaze hardening. "What did you say?"

"Th-that the Enchantress was my foster mother," she stammered.

Gunder shook his head sadly. "Poor girl, the Enchantress stole your mind, bewitched you. She slew your parents and planned wicked rites with you and the other children."

Jade frowned. "Are you sure? The other girls were orphans too."

Gunder snorted. "Don't be foolish, girl. Everyone knew that the Enchantress was evil. Why else did she hide out here in the deep forest, hidden in her enchanted castle?"

Jade said nothing.

One of the knights laughed. "Evil folks always hide from good folks."

"Or from ignorant folks," Jade whispered.

Gunder's intense eyes narrowed. "I heard that," he said. There was a new ring in his voice, of fanaticism, of iron hardness. "Are you saying that the Enchantress was *good*?"

"She fed and took care of me."

"Bah! Meaningless." He cut the air with his hand. "She practiced the foul arts. She consorted with evil creatures: ogres, dragons, trolls, and sprites. Let me assure you, young girl, that her ilk is but one step away from vampires and ghouls."

"I wouldn't know," Jade replied.

Gunder studied her, while the other knights remained carefully silent.

"I'm sorry if I've upset you, good knight," Jade said.

"No no, it isn't that," he said. "I just hate to see a pretty young mind turned to foolishness. Sometimes foolishness is harmful. I've seen too many witches burn at the stake to think otherwise." He stroked his chin. "The Enchantress is said to be long-lived and beautiful. Everyone knows that an evil price must be paid for that sort of magic. Surely she uses young girls and drains their blood. It only stands to reason."

Jade dropped her head. "Yes, of course. I'm sure you're right."

"Oh, don't go and fret, girl. You're young and foolish, but that will change."

Jade gazed up into his eyes. "Did the Duke hire you?"

Gunder waved aside the question. "The Steel Legion was in need of upkeep. We made some extra gold, yes, but the sack of this evil castle will surely bring us more than what the Duke paid."

"The Duke hated the Enchantress," Jade said. "She told us so. She said that the Duke feared her, that he wanted to crush the lowborn peasants and tax the gentry harder, but that he feared what the Enchantress would do if he tried."

Gunder shrugged, snapping his fingers. "Farmers are born to pay taxes. It's the way."

"Please forgive me, good knight, but may I ask one more foolish question?"

Gunder nodded while accepting a flagon of ale from one of the knights. He guzzled the ale until it ran from the corner of his mouth. With a loud sigh he wiped his lips and handed the flagon back. The ale stench was strong on his breath.

Jade asked, "Why did you slay the ogre brothers and try to kill the dragon?"

The knights laughed and poked one another in the ribs.

"They were evil," Gunder replied flatly. "They protected the Enchantress's castle. Besides, the Steel Legion had taken coin. We had a job to do."

"You're a strong man," Jade said.

Gunder smiled. "I know."

Jade finally stood. "I think I can help you."

Gunder's eyes grew hooded. "How?" he snapped.

"I saw the Enchantress do something over there." Jade pointed at the black dais.

Carefully Gunder hefted his battle-axe. He and his band approached the dais.

"Notice the spell-casting lines," one of the knights said. "I warrant that this is her conjuring room."

"A good guess," said another. "Sorcerers and wizards always use the highest towers for their dirty deeds."

"Perhaps," mused Gunder, stroking his chin. "But at other times they use the lowest dungeons. It varies." He sniffed at the dais.

"What do you hope to smell?" Jade asked.

He turned and looked at her. "Sulfur, young one. Magic carries many taints."

"Are you well versed in magic?" she asked artlessly.

The knights froze, glancing at Gunder.

He stood slowly and put his hands on his hips. "Out of the mouth of innocents," he said. He wiped his brow and turned to his men. "We'll have to fire the entire castle. The stink of evil has grown very strong here."

Jade jumped up onto the large dais, toeing one of the spellcasting lines.

"Here, girl," Gunder said, "come down from there."

She looked down at him. "Why?"

He grunted and hefted himself up onto the dais. "It's dangerous," he said.

She skipped away from him. "Dangerous? Surely you jest?"

"No jest." He tried to grab her. Missed. "Here, give me a hand," he yelled at the others. The knights grunted and heaved themselves up onto the large dais.

Just as the last knight clambered up, Jade danced off the dais and raised her arms high, shouting words of power. The spell-casting lines glowed blue with eldritch witchery.

"What's this!" Gunder roared. "Treachery!" He swung his axe at a blue-glowing line. The axe-head shattered.

Jade put her hands on her hips and examined the milling knights. "So," she finally said, "you slew my friends and fired my castle."

His eyes bulging, Gunder roared in surprise, "Your castle?"

"Indeed," she said. "While you were wrong about so many things, good knight, you were right about one. It is an evil spell that keeps me forever alive. I am never able to grow past puberty, never able to know a lover, nor able to be a mother. It is the price I pay."

"Demonspawn!" Gunder bellowed.

"No, there you're wrong. I don't slay innocents just for the upkeep of the Steel Legion, or for the grasping ways of a greedy Duke. I use my powers to help orphans, to build places of strength for those who are outcasts from society. But, as has happened from time immemorial, the forces of man have come and pulled down what I've built. It's an old game."

"What of us?" Gunder asked.

"You've slain the ogre brothers and killed many good forest folk. Yet why would I want your blood on my hands? No." Jade smiled. "Instead, I'll teleport you halfway across the world. That should be punishment enough. There you must deal with many new and exotic people. Perhaps you'll become tolerant enough to stay alive. The choice is yours."

She took a sorcerous stance and began to weave her spell.

"Wait!" Gunder howled. But the blue smoke billowed and a loud clap heralded their long journey.

Jade the Immortal Enchantress sank to the cold stone floor. Below the flames roared and crackled. She heaved a great sigh of sadness. Once again it was time to start over. Time to go far away and build a new castle. First, though, she had to travel to the Dragon Cave and pick up the girls. Wearily, she stood and headed down the tower stairs.

❧

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Margaret Organ-Kean is an artist living in Seattle. She studied art and art history at Boston University and the University of Washington, and currently does computer support for a living. She was recently Artist Guest of Honor at VikingCon and will be teaching art workshops at several conventions this summer.

Artwork by Vincent DiFate

The Erin Cory

by Rebecca Lyons

Outside her fourth floor door, Maddy juggled her grocery bag to her other arm and fumbled for her keys. The elevator door whooshed open and with a shriek of excitement Vanessa, dreadlocks flying, burst out. Maddy jumped and dropped the keys.

"Vanessa! If you don't sound like a banshee. Look, you made me drop my keys."

"We having pot supper tonight, Mama?" The girl's dark, smiling face looked not a bit remorseful.

"No. Sale chicken tonight. Don't want to push our welcome with the pot."

"No more beans and barley?"

"Not till we finish the chicken. Your brother will be happy. Now are you going to take this bag or pick up the keys you made me drop?"

Vanessa stooped down to pick them up. "Oh, Mom. Look. Our door's coming apart."

Wooden splinters stuck out of the door frame and the door was just slightly ajar. "What the — " Maddy set the groceries on the floor as Vanessa turned a worried, frightened look to her. "Vanessa, I want you to go to your grandmother's house for a while. I'll call you there."

"But Mom — " Rustling noises from inside the apartment made them turn.

"Don't argue with me! Go!" Vanessa turned and quietly made for the stairs. Heart pumping, Maddy eased the door open. She saw no one inside, but —

"Oh, my God." She had meant to stay silent, but the quiet exclamation came out unbidden. She opened the door further.

The apartment was a mess — drawers upended over the floor, books and newspapers askew, one bookcase overturned. More rustling noises came from her son's bedroom. She gasped and started, as if to run, but the figure that came into view was her son Michael, his portable radio hugged close.

"They didn't take it, Ma."

"Michael! Honey, how long you been here?"

He shrugged. "Five minutes, maybe."

"Come over here by me." He obediently trotted over to her.

She took his hand and guided him into the hall. "Stay here. Was anyone here when you got here?"

"No."

"Did you hear anything?"

"No. Nobody else is here. I looked through the whole house." He still cradled the radio close.

Her face crumpled in dismay. "You did what? Oh, Michael, you should never — Oh, I'll talk to you later. You stay here. Hear me? Stay here."

He nodded, and she cautiously reentered the apartment. Her feet trod on crumpled paper. She reached down and picked up some hard copy from her latest project. Her eyes immediately snapped to her desk.

The computer was still there, and the printer beside it, though her chair was overturned. She walked into the room, paper still in hand. The TV was still there, and Michael's radio, obviously. As she absently put her hand on the desk, the clink of metal distracted her. She looked down to see a pile of coins, silver ones. A couple fell to the floor as she watched.

The coin she picked up was silver and about the size of a half dollar, but it wasn't Kennedy staring out at her, and she couldn't read the words. For some reason they reminded her of —

"Finn."

"Finn? Finn O'Neil?" It had been a couple days earlier; she had opened the door a crack at his knock.

"Maddy Prudence Jackson?"

"You've got the right place. Come in." She closed the door to take off the chain, then opened it again. "So, you're the folklorist, Professor Eason's friend. Please, come in. Excuse the place. It's kind of a mess. Sit down."

"Thank you." He nodded politely, almost a bow, and took a seat. The front room was both living and dining room, with a small table where Vanessa sat and squirmed and a desk where Maddy's computer sat.

"Vanessa, don't you play with those pencils." Maddy's daughter stopped with a giggle. Maddy sneaked looks at the stranger as she finished drying her hands on a dishtowel — pale skin set off by black hair and ice blue eyes. Not bad looking for a white man. "Finn O'Neil, you said?" she confirmed as the man took out pencil and paper.

"Fin? Like in a fish?" Vanessa asked

with another giggle.

"Girl, you shush. Shouldn't you be getting out some dishes for us to eat on? Supper will be ready soon."

"Oh, Mama."

"You go on now." She turned to Finn. "I'm cooking supper in that same old pot you were asking about. You're welcome to stay to supper if you like."

His angular face brightened measurably. "Yes. Thank you."

"Now what do you want to know about that old cooking pot of mine?" She sat down on the couch opposite him.

"Old. Yes. You had said it was very old."

"Been in my family for, oh, four generations at least. It goes to Vanessa next, then to her daughter."

Vanessa smiled and glanced shyly at Finn as she set four places around the table.

Finn was writing all this down. "Yes. Can you tell me where the pot was found?"

"Found? I don't know. My mother gave it to me. Her mother — I was the oldest daughter — her mother gave it to her. She was the oldest daughter, too. Her mother, my great-grandmother, was a slave on a plantation in South Carolina." Finn nodded. "I don't know where she got it. My grandma used to call it the Erin Cory, but I don't know why."

"Iarinn Coire." Finn had paused in his writing, his eyes alight. "Iron cauldron." She arched an eyebrow at him. "Gaelge. Irish."

"I didn't know that. Irish, hm? You didn't look like you knew Swahili." She'd certainly never heard an accent like his in her north Chicago neighborhood.

He didn't get the joke. "And this iron cooking pot, it is strange and wondrous?" He stared down at his notes.

Maddy gave him a sideways glance, then nodded cautiously. "I wouldn't say that. But it's about the only heirloom I have, and it's been a big help in ways I can't begin to explain." Her eyes drifted over to where her daughter was laying out forks and napkins. "My work pays well enough, but trying to raise two kids, both in private school — it ain't easy. It — " She grimaced as rock music suddenly blared from another room. "Michael! You turn that thing down! Right now! You hear me?"

"But Mom! It's U2!" A young kid appeared in the doorway hugging a radio.

"I don't care if it's me and you both. That thing goes down or it goes off."

"Awww."

"Use those headphones! That's what your uncle bought them for."

More protests followed, but the music diminished. Maddy turned back to Finn. "Sorry. I tell him over and over, but...you were asking?"

"This pot. You say it has wondrous powers, and feeds you from nothing."

Maddy gave him another narrow glance. "Now when did I say that?" she asked quietly after several seconds of silence.

"I...uh, I've been studying."

"Studying? My pot's in books?"

"Perhaps. If it's the same one. It does feed you?"

"Beans and barley, beans and barley." Vanessa started a singsong chant.

"Vanessa, hush, girl. You mean other people know about this? I've rarely told anyone about this except family that's grown up with it. I figured no one would believe me."

With great sincerity, Finn said: "I believe you."

Maddy stared at him open-mouthed for a moment. "Well, I'll be — I'll be — " She broke off and laughed. "Well, if you'd told me this and I hadn't grown up with it, I'd think you were crazy. It's a relief to find someone who doesn't think I am."

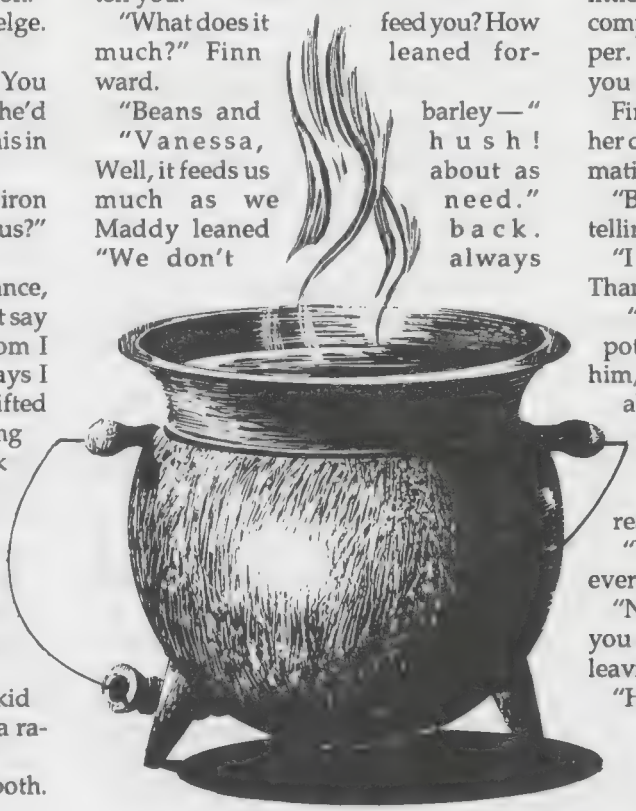
"It does feed you, then?"

"Yes. It's been a Godsend, let me tell you."

"What does it feed you? How much?" Finn leaned forward.

"Beans and barley — "

"Vanessa, hush! Well, it feeds us about as much as we need." Maddy leaned back. "We don't always



use it, but we've never gone hungry. It's always there when we need it. All you do is put the pot on the stove — "

"With water? How long does it take?"

"No, you don't even need water. You can smell it when it's cooked, then you can take the top off, and it's done. It's potluck." She chuckled. "Literally. Sometimes you get soup or stew, sometimes bread. Once I took the top off and there were two little game hens surrounded by carrots and onions. Good, too."

"Beans and barley, Mom," Vanessa interrupted shyly.

"Oh, yes. Beans and barley. Sometimes it gets a run on something and we'll eat that for days, sometimes weeks at a time. There were times, well, after my husband left, we ate out of the pot every night in the week."

Finn looked very excited. "Yes. This is miraculous."

Maddy shrugged. "It's just an old iron pot. You see, what you do is — "

"Mama," Vanessa interrupted again. "I think it's ready."

Maddy sniffed the air. "You're right." She moved to the kitchen. "The top came off, so I guess it is done. Beans and barley, Vanessa, beans and barley. We've had a run on beans and barley for a couple weeks now," she said to Finn.

"I like it," Vanessa said.

"I know you do, girl, but your brother isn't terribly fond of it. Me, I'm getting a little bored with it myself. Not that I'm complaining, pot," she said to her supper. "Finn? Where are you going? Aren't you going to stay to supper?"

Finn had risen, and bowed slightly in her direction. "I must go. I have the information I sought."

"But there's more. I haven't finished telling you — "

"I have all the information I need. Thank you."

"But — well..." Maddy replaced the pot lid and went to open the door for him, since he seemed quite adamant about leaving. "Well, I hope I was able to be of some help in your research."

"Yes, much help. More than you realize. Thank you!"

"Uh, Finn. You're not going to tell everybody about this, are you?"

"No. I promise. I will tell no one. Thank you so much, Maddy Jackson." He left, leaving Maddy staring after him.

"He was kind of a strange man, Mama."

"Yes, he was. But I guess it takes all kinds. Wish he'd let me finish, though. Vanessa, give your brother

Artwork by Vincent DiFate

the bad news and then finish setting the table. All this talking's making me hungry."

"Mom? Mama?" Maddy's focus drifted away from the silver coin. Her son stood in the doorway, his eyes large and wary. "Can I come in now, Mama?"

"What? I — oh — "

"I checked the whole place. Ain't no one else here."

"Oh, I suppose so, Michael." Clutching the coin in her hand, she reached for the phone.

In a small sleeping room a neighborhood away, Finn reverently examined the old cook pot. It seemed nothing special, just a three-legged pot with a lid and a handle to hang it over the fire, but Finn had no doubt that it was the treasure he sought. Carefully, he set it down, kicked off his Reeboks, and struggled out of his jeans.

Soon he was attired in a red tunic, embroidered knotwork on the edges, over a white undertunic. His feet were clad in fine leather boots, and a sword hung from his belt. He slipped a golden torc around his neck and opened the door to the closet. A rectangular patch in back flickered like a broken TV.

Only one more thing left. He picked up the phone and punched out numbers, smiling in satisfaction.

"Maddy Jackson?" The voice on the other end sounded tinny and distracted.

"Yes? Who — "

"This is Finn. We talked about your Erin Cory?"

"Finn! What — what do you want? Oh, you have to call back; I have to call — "

"Do not be afraid. Nothing was hurt. I took only what I needed."

Alarm made the voice on the other end shrill. "What? What are you talking about?"

"I had to make you think it was ordinary theft until I was away. I only took the Erin Cory, and I left you a goodly sum of silver for it."

"You? You left the silver? Broke into my apartment?"

"I did not take your electronic things. I took only what I came for, the cauldron."

"My cooking pot? Just a second. You just wait." After a couple moments she was back. "My pot! You stole it!"

"Did you find the silver?"

"I don't want your silver, damn it! I want my Erin Cory!"

"I am a champion of my people, and they have great need. You have children. I'm sure you can understand."

"No, I don't understand. You scared me and my two babies half to death to steal an old cooking pot, and you want me to understand? You're deranged. You're crazy."

"I am not deranged," Finn said patiently. "I am a hero of the Gael. My people need the food the pot can provide. I have paid you for it."

"Four generations of heirloom can't be bought for thirty pieces of silver."

"Only ten..."

"I want my Erin Cory back. I'm calling the police." With a sigh of consternation, Finn put down the receiver and turned to the closet where shadows flickered and played.

"We cannot raid the Sidhe for supplies," the sorceress-queen, Ailin, had said to him before he left. "Their magic is too strong. Be successful, Finn. Find the Iarinn Coire, else we die."

But the proud eyes that had bored into his seemed to say more. *Prove me wrong,* they had seemed to challenge. Beneath the hope and hunger and despair — *prove you're more like your brother than I think.*

That is what he had read in them as he turned from her and vanished into the doorway, the same doorway that he now faced from the other side. He held the handle of the cauldron casually but reverently by two fingers. Yes, he would prove to her, prove to them all, of what mettle was their new champion made.

In spite of his hero status, fear clutched him just a little as he stepped through the shadowy patterns in the back of the closet. The air that met him smelled different, a little musty, but smelled of home. Finn smiled.

He was within the dark passage of the mound; before him was a rectangular patch of blue sky. A white cloud scudded across it, and a bird appeared briefly. He took it as a good omen.

As Finn stepped from the mound, a grey-haired warrior, half nodding with sleep, looked up, gasped, and jumped to his feet.

"Finn! My lord!" In back of him Finn saw a multitude, the army of the Gael ranged around the cooking fires. The grey-haired warrior turned and called. Faces turned to him, and, when they saw Finn, several came running.

"I thank the Dagda that I am not too late," Finn murmured, and lifted the cauldron above his head for all to see. A gasp and a sigh took the whole crowd. Soon, Finn was surrounded by his people, surrounded by expressions of awe, relief, thanks, and from all of them the underlying expression of hopelessness stalled.

The aging Queen Ailin, one of the first to approach him, smiled with relief, and the army surrounding him raised their swords and spears in a cheer so loud the Sidhe must have heard it over their own cookfires.

"Finn," Lady Ailin said. "You have brought us hope."

"I have brought you food." Finn gave the cauldron to one of the squires. "Put it over the fire, and put the lid on. There is no need of water. Now go." The boy smiled and bowed his head, taking the cauldron reverently, and took off at a dead run. Finn turned to Ailin. "It took longer than I'd hoped in that strange Otherworld. Are my men still well?"

Ailin and her nephew, Lord Marc, exchanged puzzled but amused glances. "My lord," Marc said. "You were gone but three days and three nights. This is but the morn of the fourth day."

Finn glanced at him, honestly surprised. "Was I?" He turned to Ailin. "Strange are the ways of your magic, Ailin."

"Never mind." They began walking toward the cookfire where a crowd had gathered around the pot. Marc walked ahead. "You are here and safe, and you have brought the cauldron. You are sure it is the cauldron?"

Finn smiled indulgently. "I have seen it work. I have no doubt."

"You must have many strange adventures to tell of your time in the Otherworld."

"Indeed I do."

"I would hear them."

"And I will gladly tell them, though it will take many nights."

Ailin's weary face creased into a smile, and she leaned closer. No one else was near. "I must admit to you, Finn, I had misgivings when you were declared champion after the Sidhe killed your brother."

"You had doubts as to my ability?" Finn was patient and forgiving, as befits a hero.

"Not your ability, no. You are as strong as your brother. But you have always seemed rash and hasty. Wisdom and patience also befit a warrior."

Finn arched an eyebrow and changed the subject. "You worry about the Sidhe."

"As I should. We had agreed to surrender if your brother were defeated by their champion. We broke faith."

"I will not suffer my people to be destroyed because of the failings of one

man, even my brother."

Ailin smiled again and dropped the subject. "You will be wanting a bath and fresh clothing. My servants can see to this."

"I will indeed, my queen, but not till my men have eaten." He sat down at the queen's cookfire and accepted a cup of watered ale from a servant. As they waited for the wondrous pot to fill with food for the army of the Gael, Finn began to tell them of his wondrous adventures, of silver towers that reached into the sky, of chariots that puffed smoke and had invisible horses inside, of lamps that glowed without fire. He had easily captivated his audience's attention when one of his men came over and waited for his attention.

The man seemed hesitant, even embarrassed. "My lord," he said when Finn glanced up at him. "My lord, the pot still gives nothing."

"Nothing? What do you mean?"

"Nothing. We have waited two hours and more. There is still nothing inside." His puzzled expression was overcast with the same despair Finn had seen before leaving for the Otherworld.

"How have you used it?"

"We did as you instructed. We put it over the fire, put the top on, and waited."

"You did not put water in it?"

"You instructed us not to."

Finn rose. "Let me see this."

It was as the man had said. The iron pot radiated heat from the fire below, yet when they lifted the lid with a hook, they saw nothing within.

"Perhaps," the druidess-queen said behind him. "Perhaps it does need water."

"Perhaps," Finn agreed, puzzled himself. "Very well. Fill it with water."

Water was poured in and immediately began to steam. "Not so much. Not so much," the queen directed. "Leave it only half full." The men did as she commanded and replaced the lid. Their haggard hungry looks were leaning again toward despair. Finn and the queen walked away.

"Are you sure," asked the queen quietly, when they were well out of earshot, "are you sure you have the right cauldron?"

He stopped and faced her. "My Lady Ailin, your magic put me within a league of the cauldron, though even then it took me months to find it. The people there live as thickly as sacrifices within a wicker; they crowd out the trees and grass. But I spoke to the dark woman, who told me she only had to put the pot over her fire, put the lid on, and wait."

"Did she say how long it took?"

"She said it took different times. I assumed it took no longer than a usual meal. Sometimes it gave her barley stew, sometimes game — "

Queen Ailin was shaking her head. "But you did not see this for yourself? You did not see an empty cauldron give forth food?"

"I had no reason to doubt her, my lady."

"Those of low birth may say anything if they wish to sell you something, if she is interested in your silver rather than the truth."

"I did not...exactly buy it from her, my lady."

Queen Ailin paused to look up at him. "What? Did she then give it to you?"

For the first time, Finn looked uncomfortable. "No. I took it."

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"Took it?" The queen frowned, and her voice became harsher. "How do you mean? Took it by force?"

"No, my lady. No one was hurt. I would not hurt a woman. I took it from the house when there was no one there and left a goodly sum of silver in return."

"But you stole it."

"The lives of my men, my clan, were at stake. She and her children would not starve without it, and my people would."

"You stole the cauldron from a woman and her children?" Her voice was louder now, and people nearby had begun to stare.

"They had no need of it! They would not starve. Look!" He flung his arm out. "The cookfires of the Sidhe are still out there! The smoke from their meals drifts up to our nostrils. They need not attack. They need only wait. And they know it!"

Her face as she looked at him was as stony as her hair was grey.

From a little ways away, one of the men called out. "Finn, my lady. The pot has boiled dry."

She glanced away from Finn and strode to where the men stood with the cauldron. "It is said," she turned back to face Finn, "that the cauldron will not boil the food of cowards."

Finn's jaw worked as he tried to keep back anger. "I am no coward, lady," he said slowly. "I entered your magic door into a strange country of folk darker than night. Your magic with languages was incomplete. Oh, I could understand the language of birds, but they spoke of no cauldron. I only half understood the language of the people. I braved many dangers to bring back this cauldron. I am no coward!"

"You stole it from a woman and her babes. This is not the action of a hero." Around her the listening army began murmuring among themselves.

"My clan is starving! The Sidhe will destroy us soon!" Around him, his men's faces were as hard as the Druidess's. "The woman will never miss it. I left silver for it."

The queen walked to the pot and with a hook turned it to show the empty interior.

"I don't understand." Finn strode to it. "I did as she said."

"It is obvious the magic fails us." She let go of the pot, and it swung over the blazing fire. "You have shamed us."

"No."

"It is you who have brought destruction on us."

The men around them now began to grumble. "We are doomed!" one whispered.

"No!" Finn began to back up.

The men began to speak. "The Sidhe will have our heads," one said. "Our women and children will be slaves."

"No," said Marc, drawing his sword and advancing on Finn. "Perhaps only one head will suffice."

"I have brought you the cauldron you seek. Obviously we are not using it properly. Lady Ailin! Stop this nonsense!"

"The gods will forsake us while we have a coward as champion." She did not look at him.

"I am no coward!" He backed up as Marc approached. "I went through the Door — " He looked behind him. "The Door." The mound was not far away. He broke and ran for it. The voices of his men roared behind him in anger and anguish. He reached the mound. "The Door. It's here somewhere." Something poked him painfully in the ribs. "Ow!"

"Will you die like a champion or like a coward? Draw your sword."

"There is no need to fight. The cauldron will work. I swear it."

"Life in the Otherworld has made you soft. I will take your head without a fight if I have to, coward." He drew back his sword to strike.

Finn drew his own and blocked the blow. "Stand back! I am champion and can outfight you. You have no chance."

Perhaps he was right. He was their best, save for his dead brother, and Marc was weak with hunger. But Finn had not touched a sword in many months. He had become soft, he realized. And Marc had anger behind him — and many men. Finn could not outfight them all.

Though Finn had nicked Marc's arm, Marc's return scored a strike against his leg. Finn cried out and stumbled backwards against the mound. To one side, Queen Ailin was chanting, arms upraised. Chanting a curse, Finn realized. The next blow he blocked rammed vibrations all the way up his arm, and he almost lost his weapon. He only half blocked the next blow, and it scored a deep gash against his upper chest and left arm.

He could not hold out, he realized, and broke away, trying to circle the mound, trying to find the Door. A score across his back made him fall. Queen Ailin's spell reached a climax, and the mound began to buckle beneath him.

"Let you live your curse all the hours of your life. Let you wander until you have found your honor. Let us be rid of you!" The dirt of the mound crumbled in on itself. The fall, though only a few feet, seemed to last for a long time. He landed heavily, his injured arm trapped beneath him, on a hardwood floor. Something lay beneath his head — his Reeboks. The back of his closet shimmered with magic. Briefly, he saw the images of Marc and Ailin. He rested his head against the Reeboks, feeling the blood seeping out of him.

A metal clang sounded, and the pot came hurling out of the closet at him. He tried to fend it off with his good arm, but the pot was still hot and burned him. He cried out in pain as the cauldron and its lid went bouncing into the interior of the room. Ailin's image reappeared once more, mouthing silently at him, then the flickering at the back of his closet collapsed into a shining point at the center before disappearing altogether. He stared at empty shelving.

He had no idea how long he had been away from the Otherworld. He hoped the phone still worked. Crawling to it, he lifted the receiver, heard a dial tone, and punched 911.

"Please help me," he said into the receiver. "I'm bleeding." He gave them the address. "Hurry." He dropped the receiver and rested his head against the floor, sobbing from injuries and shame.

"Mrs. Maddy Prudence Jackson?" The woman's voice on the phone sounded hesitant.

"Yes. This is she." Maddy was working at home on the computer that day and was a little annoyed at being disturbed. It was nearly impossible to work in the evening with the kids around.

"Yes, my name is Anne Woloszyk. I'm a nurse at Rush-Presbyterian — "

"Rush-Presby? Oh, my God. The kids. My babies! Are they all right?"

"The kids? Oh, no, Mrs. Jackson. I'm not calling about your children. I didn't even know you had children."

Annoyance returned. "Well, then — I don't understand."

"Let me explain. Do you know someone named Finn O'Neil?"

Annoyance increased. "Yes, I do. Or did."

"He's a patient here at the hospital — "

"Patient? What happened to him?"

"He was in some kind of a fight, apparently. Came in with several knife wounds. I've been assigned to him. He told me that he had something of yours, an iron cooking pot?"

"My pot! It's been found?"

"He said he borrowed it and wanted to

make sure it got back to you."

"Borrowed it? Hmph! That's not my word for it."

"Would you like me to come by with it? I've just gone off shift, and he was very adamant that it be returned to you."

"Yes, I would like that very much, Mrs. Wo — Wal — "

"Woloszyk. Ms. I can be by in about an hour and a half."

"Thank you very much, Ms. Wo — Wolosh — "

The other laughed. "Anne. Just call me Anne."

Later, Maddy opened the door almost before Anne Woloszyk knocked. "I was looking out the window for you. Come in."

A pretty white girl with glasses stepped in. Her wavy hair was caught back in a barrette, and she was dressed in nurse's whites and sensible shoes. A Jewel shopping bag hung from her arm.

Maddy closed the door behind her. "It was good of you to come over, Anne. It must have been out of your way."

"Oh, not that far. I just live in Rogers Park."

"Let me take your cloak. Is it a bit chilly?"

"Just a little. Thank you." Maddy put the cloak on a hook and turned back with open curiosity.

"Mr. O'Neil," Anne began, "was very concerned that I give this back to you as soon as possible." She took the pot and its lid out of the shopping bag.

"Hmph," Maddy said in response to Mr. O'Neil. "Yes, there it is. My old cooking pot. My Erin Cory. I sure am glad to have it back."

"It's very unusual. Sort of like the cauldron in *MacBeth*." She handed it to Maddy and found herself a seat.

"Mm?" Maddy was inspecting the pot.

"*MacBeth*. Shakespeare. It's a play. There are these three witches around an old cauldron, and MacBeth comes by — "

With an indulgent smile, Maddy interrupted her. "Yes, I have been to college. I do know about Shakespeare."

Anne stammered and subsided as Maddy walked into the kitchen with the pot.

"Now you tell me what this Mr. Finn O'Neil has gotten himself into."

"Oh, yes. He came in with several severe gashes that required quite a few stitches."

Maddy reentered the front room and sat down across from Anne. "Is he going to be okay?"

"He lost a lot of blood, but he wasn't critical." She hesitated for a moment. "They were talking about moving him to the psychiatric section." Maddy sat back. "He was talking...strange. Odd things. Did he seem strange to you?"

Maddy nodded, with a wry smile. "Very strange. What kind of things was he saying?"

"He was very...concerned that you get that cauldron back. Gave me the keys to his place and insisted. That's what he called it. A cauldron. He said that, uh, that it might save his honor and let the gods favor him again."

"Gods! He some kind of heathen?"

"I don't know, Maddy. Perhaps he thought he was."

"Maybe I should visit him. Poor boy. Show him there are no hard feelings."

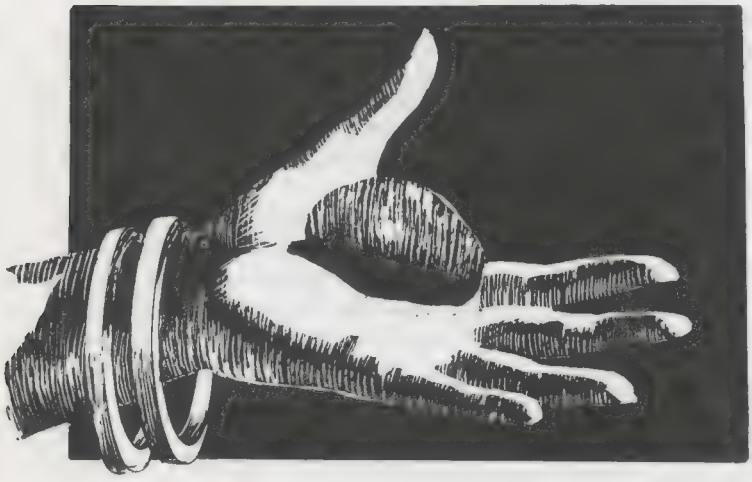
Anne lowered her eyes. "That'll be a little difficult, Maddy. When I came on shift this morning, I found out he'd disappeared."

"Disappeared?"

"Gone. Without a trace."

"How could he disappear, as injured as he was?"

"I don't know. Though perhaps he heard talk of the psychiatric wing, and it scared him."



Maddy sighed and leaned back. "You know, it makes me wonder. You think you can trust people, and I let him into my house. Me alone with two children. Perhaps I was crazy to let him in."

Anne was fishing in her purse. "He left this." She held out a piece of paper. "It has your name on it. It doesn't make a lot of sense."

Maddy took it. "'May the dag...dagda? bless you and me'," she read. " 'I am a hero and cannot live in shame. I go to salve my honor. There might still be time to save my people.' You're right. It doesn't make much sense."

"At least you've got your stew pot back."

"That's right, at least." She rose and entered the kitchen.

"Why don't you stay to supper? Make up some for all your trouble," she called into the other room.

"Oh, I don't want to be any bother."

"No bother at all. My kids'll be home soon. I'd have to get supper for them in any case. Besides, around here there's always plenty." She laughed, as if at a private joke. "You know, that Finn — one of his problems was that he was just too damn hasty. He never did let me finish telling him about my cooking pot."

"He seemed to think there was something unusual about it."

"Oh, there is, though no one believes me." She paused, musing. "Maybe that's why I let him in. He believed me."

Anne came in to stand beside her. "Can I help? Cut vegetables or something?"

"No need. The pot does everything."

"Sort of a medieval crockpot."

Maddy laughed. "It's been in my family a long time, but it ain't that old. But I never got a chance to tell that Finn." She fished around in the cupboard above the stove. "Ah, here it is. This old pot ain't worth nothing without its stone." To Anne's puzzled look, she brought out a flattened stone, about as big as her hand, variegated like agate or marble, and worn smooth. "You ever heard of stone soup?"

Anne nodded, smiling. "Soup from nothing."

"Well, that's what this is. You put the stone in the bottom," she explained as she did so, "put the lid on, and start the fire under it. That's all you gotta do, and you get supper. Stone soup. Soup from nothing." She smiled at Anne's doubtful look. "Sometimes it's a microwave, sometimes it's a slow cooker. You're looking at me kind of funny, Anne."

Anne smiled. "If you heat that pot up, you'll get a hot rock, nothing more."

"I suppose if someone had told it to me, I'd find it hard to believe, too. But I learned about this pot standing in front of my mother's stove when I wasn't even big enough to see the stove top. She learned it from her mother the same way. And her mother's mother was a slave on

Artwork by Vincent DiFate

a plantation, and she didn't even have a stove. There are some things you just have to accept." She turned to look at the iron pot. "Sometimes I'm afraid that if I stop believing, it'll stop happening."

Anne's look was doubtful, kind, and a little pitying.

"It was Shakespeare who said: 'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio —' " Maddy stopped to sniff the air.

" 'Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.' Yes, I know the quote."

"Why, I do believe it's going to be a microwave today," Maddy said. "Maybe it knows there's an unbeliever in the room."

Anne was sniffing the air in astonishment. She smelled food, coming from the pot.

With a wooden spoon, Maddy lifted the lid and set it aside, then spooned some of the brimming stew out and tasted it. "Mm. Excellent. As usual." She offered some to Anne, who tasted.

"Unbelievable! And I was standing right here." She looked at Maddy as if she might be a sleight-of-hand artist.

Maddy laughed and tasted again. "Beans and barley. I guess it was good I didn't tell that Finn about the stone, or he would've taken it, too. This old pot has fed us well for four generations, but I do wish it would get off this kick of beans and barley."

❧

Rebecca Lyons has had stories published in **WOMEN OF DARKNESS II**, *Pulphouse*, *After Hours*, and *Strange Days*, among others. She is editorial assistant for *Geology*, a scientific journal, and is a former associate editor of *Pandora*. Of Irish descent herself, she once lived in the north Chicago neighborhood where "The Erin Cory" takes place, although she says she has since moved to Colorado, where she can "starve to death against a prettier backdrop." This is her first story for *FANTASY Magazine*.

Vincent DiFate worked in animated films before turning to freelance artwork. He received a Hugo as Best Professional Artist in 1979 as well as the Skylark and the Lensman Awards. He is regarded as one of the world's major illustrators of futuristic themes, including astronomical and aerospace themes for the National Geographic Society, CBS television, and NASA. Workman published **DiFATE'S CATALOG OF SCIENCE FICTION HARDWARE** in 1980. He is a past president of ASFA and was the Artist Guest of Honor at the 1992 Worldcon.

The Last Word

The cover for this issue has been nominated for a Chesley Award as "best color work; unpublished". (It's no longer unpublished, of course, but the award is for 1992.)

I discussed one of the words in the cover story with its author, Janny Wurts. " 'Sainly'?" I asked. "Is that a typo for 'saintly'?" She told me this is an old word for one of the two courts of faery, sometimes described as the "seelie and the unseelie" and other times as the "sainly and the unsainly". So — my vocabulary enlarged, and I gained additional respect for the author's meticulous background research for her writing.

Ellen Vandover sent us names and phone numbers for bookstores in Southern California. Thank you!

BOOKMARK ART CONTEST

We are announcing a bookmark artwork contest. (This was George Barr's idea, and I think it's a good one.) There will be two awards given, of $100 each, for the best one-color-plus-black-ink bookmark and the best black-and-white bookmark. Bookmarks should measure 7-1/2 inches tall and 1-1/2 to 3 inches wide. Submissions may be any size as long as they will reproduce clearly at this final size. Artwork must leave room for the magazine's logo (and may include it, or you may indicate clearly where it should go). You may submit more than one entry, but not more than ten. For information about the logo, please send a stamped, addressed envelope to Bookmark Contest Information, Marion Zimmer Bradley's FANTASY Magazine, P.O. Box 249, Berkeley CA 94701. Deadline for entries is August 15, 1993, and the results will be announced in issue #21 and at the *FANTASY Magazine* dealer table at ConFrancisco.

—*Rachel E. Holmen*

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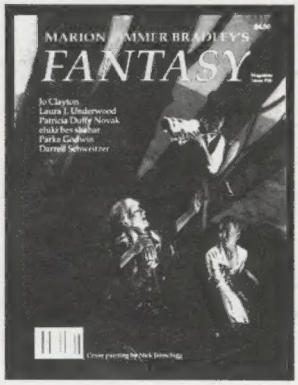

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The Cauldron — Issue #19

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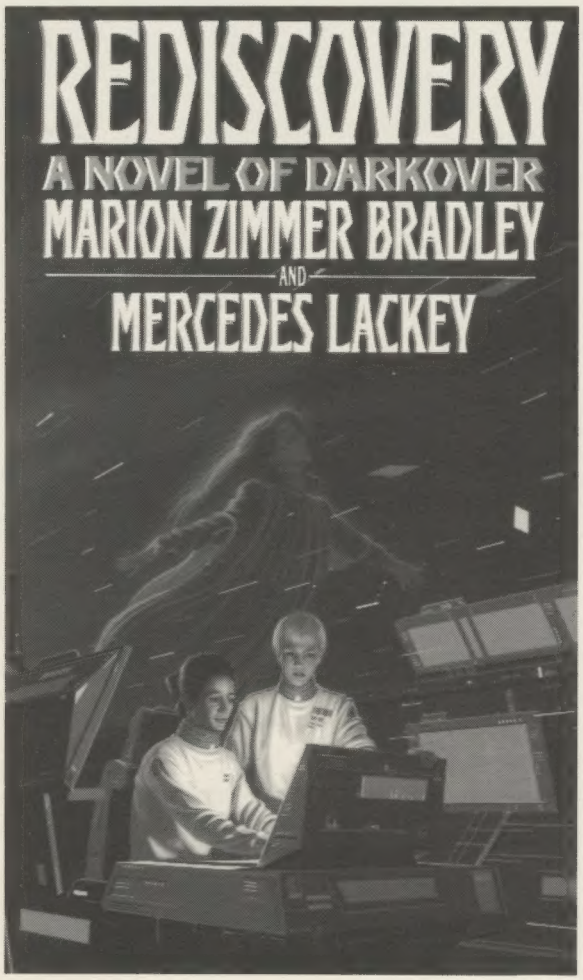

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• Jacket art by Romas

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